

“A great heathen fist from the North”

Vikings, Norse Mythology, and Medievalism in Nordic Extreme Metal Music.

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Extreme Metal

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Summary

Viking metal is a dynamic and popular subgenre of metal music of burgeoning popularity coming primarily from Nordic countries. These musicians use their nations' Viking histories and saga material as inspiration for their lyrics and nostalgic reimaginings of the past are used to make commentaries on modern society and hopes for the future. Viking metal bands use the Middle Ages and the Viking Age as a screen upon which to play with nostalgic imaginings of what life was like then or at least how it should have been based upon aspects of the collective memory of their communities which can include the works of historians and that of artists and political figures. They use this as a means of criticizing the modern Christian world they perceive as being weaker than the ancient one.

The three main components of Viking metal are:

- The idealization of a national past from which an ethnic identity can be constructed on a national, Scandinavian, or pan-Nordic level.
- A staunch opposition to Christianity that is based on the perceived oppression of their ancestors in the Viking Age for which they lust for vengeance. This vengeance is described as taking place in a grand Ragnarok-inspired battle between the pagan forces and the Christian.
- The romanticization of the natural primordial world and its 'dark forces'. The legacy with is contained within the ethnic blood of the people and tied to the land.

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Introduction

The Viking Age has captured the imaginations of many and has provided fertile ground for reimaginings and reinterpretations in various forms of literature, art, and music since the nineteenth century. Any post-medieval representation of the Middle Ages can be called a medievalism. Medievalisms can reveal much about the way history is viewed and used, attitudes about the contemporary world, and the creator's hopes for the future. Medievalism in popular music can reveal opinions and attitudes about contemporary society and culture in interesting ways. Metal music has often been described as a method of rebellion, particularly for youth, but it can also be a constructive force which provides alternative cultural identities to those accepted and promoted by the cultural, religious, and/or national pressures of the location where the music is produced and consumed.¹ One example of pop-culture medievalism that aids in the construction of cultural identity is the musical subgenre of Viking metal. Viking metal mixes the aural brutality of extreme metal music with lyrics recounting Norse myths and epic Viking battles. The subgenre started in Sweden and has developed and become established in the Nordic countries within the past twenty years and has exploded worldwide to the point where there are bands in countries as removed from the subject as Spain or Brazil writing lyrics and epic music extolling the bravery of the Vikings and the superiority of Norse paganism.

Considering its wide appeal and audience it has become a method of transmission of knowledge and myth about the history and culture of its subject countries. It is important then to examine what the Nordic bands are saying about their nation's histories and myths and what that reveals of their opinions regarding contemporary society. These bands use aspects of history to construct a glorious Golden age in which men fight for honour and pride; these are two values seen to be missing from a weakened modern world. The aim is not to assess historical accuracy for there is little and it is largely irrelevant for this discussion as "reimaginings of the Middle Ages are essentially fantasies built upon fantasies for many medievalisms draw more firmly from

¹ Jeremy Wallach, Harris M. Berger, and Paul D. Greene. "Affective Overdrive, Scene Dynamics, and Identity in the Global Metal Scene." *Metal Rules the Globe*. (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011. p 23

medieval ideas about fictionality than they do from medieval history.”² The very anachronism of Viking metal is actually the most authentically medieval aspect of it because is not the majority of medieval literature, from the chivalric Romances to the Sagas, more about the dreams of what medieval people felt their world should be like rather than actual accurate historical portrayals?

The three main components of Viking metal and thus the chapters of the thesis are as follows: 1) a construction of an idealized national, Scandinavian, or Nordic history; 2) the opposition to Christianity; 3) the romanticization of the natural world and pagan religion. These three components are closely related and are often all featured in the same song.

The first chapter is focused on how Viking metal bands use their nations’ Viking Age history as a basis for the construction of ethnicity. I use Andrew D. Smith’s six Components of Ethnic Myth to demonstrate that these bands are creating their own ethnic myths by combining aspects of history with myth and pure fantasy to concoct a desired past upon which they wish to model their ideal future. Smith’s six components of origin, location, ancestry, a heroic age, decline, and regeneration essentially delineate the major themes featured throughout Viking metal. While national identity is crucial to many of the bands discussed it is also very often fluid and can encompass broader Scandinavian or Nordic identities as they portray themselves as a unified pagan ‘North’ against the Christian South in lieu of national differences.

Chapter two is focused upon Christianity and how the bands use the negative Christian medieval sources about the Norsemen as inspiration to paint the Vikings as grand anti-Christian warriors. Viking metal bands convey the conversion process as a bloody and treacherous one where the Nordic people were forced into adopting a false foreign god or killed. This perceived oppression provides a motivation for vengeance resulting in a Ragnarok-inspired holy war. This millenarianism is based upon the idea that the old pagan gods reside within the blood of their ancestors and are reawakening to lead the pagan forces against the Christians in a brutal final battle after which the world will be reborn in the image of the noble heroic lost past. The heroic past is valued because of the belief in the superiority of pagan or “Viking” morality. As always with extreme metal, the goal is ultimately the denigration of Christianity rather than the exultation of paganism.

² Tison Pugh and Angela Jane Weisl eds. *Medievalisms: Marking the Past in the Present*. (Oxon: Routledge, 2013). p 3.

Chapter three is about the deep connection between Viking metal and nature. Scandinavians, particularly Norwegians, are perceived as being particularly in tune with the land. Black/Viking metal lyrics are full of references to fjords, mountains, and brutal dark winters and songs frequently sample sounds from nature such as chirping birds, rolling waves, and rumbling thunder. In this chapter the idea of legacy is also explored because the familial lineages are very much tied to the land and the construction of identity. The common image of the wolf/ werewolf will also be discussed in this chapter as it is used on many levels in metal and literature as a symbol representing all that is dark and uncivilized in the medieval period which makes it so suitable for use within the metal genre.

Problemstilling

What can the use of Vikings and Norse mythology in metal music tell us about how people construct the past? How this constructed past is used to create a national and/or self-identity? What does this reveal regarding opinions about modern life, society, and culture?

Definition of Terms

To those unfamiliar with metal the subgenres can be confusing barrier and even within the metal scene subgenre classifications are the subject of endless dispute. These arguments in general and most particularly regarding metal scholarship are ultimately useless. That said there are major differences between the subgenres so I will delineate my usage of the terms. *Extreme metal* is an umbrella term typically associated with the genres of Black, Death, Thrash, Doom, and sometimes Speed metal. *Viking metal* is an umbrella term for any metal band whose major lyrical theme features Vikings. Viking metal typically consists of Black and Folk metal but can also include bands from other subgenres such as Unleashed and Amon Amarth³ which are Death metal bands. Lyrically and in complementary material such as album artwork and videos *Death metal* is about death and all relating subject matter such as war gore, torture, murder, etc. It is characterized by harsh and deep vocals which are occasionally but aptly compared to the voice of Sesame Street's Cookie Monster. It typically has a focus in the present and future while Black metal is more traditionally backwards looking. *Black metal* is characterized by harsh screeching

³ Amon Amarth are typically considered Melodic Death metal

or growl vocals, heavy distortion, and substandard recording and production values. Lyrical themes typically include misanthropy, antireligious sentiment and/ or Satanism, isolation, a romanticized past, and nature. *Folk metal* is any other genre of metal combined with folk music by authentic or synthetic means. Thematically it features nature, mythological beings like trolls, folklore, and paganism. I will use each subgenre label when I am discussing a majority case. If I use Viking metal it will be something prevalent across the entire subgenre but I will mostly be referencing Black metal as many of the themes discussed are prevalent in the wider Black metal 'scene' and not exclusive to those bands that involve the Vikings. There will always be overlap and bands that fit in multiple categories or none at all so I would recommend not placing too much attention to the subgenre labels if unfamiliar with the actual musical styles.

A *Medievalism* is any post-medieval responses, interpretations, or reimagining of the Middle Ages. The International Society for the Study of Medievalism says that this can include, but is not restricted to, the activities of scholars, historians and philologists in rediscovering medieval materials; the ways in which such materials were and are used by political groups intent on self-definition or self-legitimation; and artistic creations, whether literary, visual or musical, based on whatever has been or is thought to have been recovered from the medieval centuries.⁴

Sources

My primary source materials are lyrics from a variety of different Northern European bands. Ideally the lyrics will be provided by the bands themselves in CD jackets or webpages, if not available there or discernibly audible to me, then I will rely upon fan-run and edited lyrics databases such as darklyrics.com. I will be focusing mainly upon bands from Norway, Sweden, and Finland as this is where the most popular Viking metal bands are from and they will be most useful in determining the extent to which reinterpretation of one's cultural past inflect on the construction of nation and identity. More consideration will be given to more established bands that have affected the scene either through pervasive musical or artistic influence or through

⁴ www.medievalism.net

popularity. Notable bands from Northern European countries with less of a metal scene such as Denmark, Iceland, and the Faroe Islands are also featured as they can contain unique features that set them apart from bands from countries with a long metal tradition and have unique approaches regarding national history and identity. There is much to question and discuss about the proliferation of Viking-themed metal in non-Nordic countries as varied as Germany, Canada, and Brazil but I feel that this is beyond the scope of this current project.

Numerous bands within the broader metal scene have included reference to the Vikings or Norse Mythology i.e. Led Zeppelin's "Immigrant Song" or Manowar's "Sons of Odin" but I am specifically looking at the 'extreme metal' subgenres and further then at bands that have not only made passing reference to the Vikings or Norse myth in a song or two but have devoted a number of albums to the lyrical topic.

Method/ Theory

'Metal studies' is a burgeoning field that does not arise from any single discipline but is incredibly multi- and interdisciplinary in nature and has developed through the contributions of diverse researchers who deploy methods used in their respective disciplines to explore metal music.⁵ This means that contributions have been from a vast number of disciplines such as musicology, political science, sociology, literature, religious studies, economics, and even physics.⁶

I will be conducting a hermeneutical examination of the lyrics of prominent Nordic metal bands to find and analyse their usage and representations of Vikings, Norse mythology, and other distinctly Nordic themes. I will analyse the lyrics to determine how lyricists use medieval source material as a foundation for their lyrics and what they are conveying about their perception of their heritage and identity through the use of the aforementioned themes. How band members represent their nation's past and construct their present identities through their re-imaginings of the past reveals opinions about and reactions to present day concerns.

⁵ Deena Weinstein. "How Is Metal Studies Possible?" *Journal for Cultural Research*, 15:3. 2011. 244.

⁶ Physicists at Cornell recently published a paper titled "Collective Motion of Moshers at Heavy Metal Concerts".

This is in line with the practice of Medieval Cultural Studies presented by members of the BABEL Working Group. The term and practice of Medieval Cultural Studies seems to have originated from the “Cultural Frictions: Medieval Cultural Studies in Post-Modern Contexts” conference which was held at Georgetown University in 1995.⁷ Medieval Cultural Studies concerns itself with the reception and representation of the Middle Ages from the Renaissance to present and specifically how the Middle Ages have been invented or constructed by writers, artists, scholars, etc. Looking at the relation between the medieval and the modern in different times and places can identify and illuminate the ways in which history and the processes of historicizing have shaped ideas of the present and future. At the aforementioned conference Paul Strohm articulated that cultural studies, whether medieval or contemporary, must attend to both set of texts (and their discursive practices) as well as their materiality and social impact of texts in particular times and places.⁸ In its simplest incarnation this form of cultural studies entails “studying artifacts of contemporary popular and political culture ... and bringing to the analysis of those artifacts the longest historical perspective possible.”⁹ Whenever we discuss ‘the medieval’ it is, according to Stephanie Trigg, Tom Prendergast and others, always partly a product of the present and therefore a form of medievalism despite there having been numerous attempts to distance the practice of medievalism from that of Medieval Studies and to denigrate it by doing so.¹⁰

Approaching ‘Viking metal’ music from the longest possible perspective facilitates the exploration of the myriad of influences and sources from the original medieval source material through to the popular and scholarly constructions of the Viking Age in the Victorian period, the National Romantic movements, during the Third Reich, and contemporary incarnations. In each of these periods the Viking Age and the Vikings as characters were recreated and manipulated to suit the needs or explore issues prevalent to the respective presents. They have been used to comment upon issues such as nationality, religion, and masculinity and those continue to be the major tropes found in modern metal music. This reveals mentalities and social conditions that

⁷ <http://www.siue.edu/~ejoy/postmedievalProspectus.htm>

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Eileen A. Joy and Myra J. Seaman. “Introduction-Through the Glass, Darkly: Medieval Cultural Studies at the End of History.” *Cultural Studies of the Modern Middle Ages*. Edited by Eileen A. Joy, Myra J. Seaman, Kimberly K. Bell, and Mary K. Ramsey. New York: Palgrave Macmillan. 2007, 9.

¹⁰ postmedievalProspectus

persist over long durations of time but each time period has unique historical and social situations that effect production and reception of texts.

Historiography

Metal Studies

The academic study of metal music is a rather recent field but a burgeoning one. When one looks at the genealogy of scholarship towards metal it has had to break through the largely negative accounts of metal that took place in sociological and psychological studies where preference for Heavy metal was questioned as an indicator for youth at risk for deviance and delinquency, depression, or violent tendencies. While hard rock and punk were considered fruitful grounds for scholarly inquiry while metal was ignored or maligned. It was not until the work of Deena Weinstein *Heavy Metal: A Cultural Sociology* published in 1991 that a sympathetic approach was used in describing Heavy metal. In this monograph Weinstein argued that the denigration of metal was based upon a grave misunderstanding of the music, its fans, and their culture which she aimed to correct in the text. This work was shortly followed by Robert Walser's *Running with the Devil: Power, Gender and Madness in Heavy Metal* in 1993 which was another sociological look into the forms and practices of the makers and consumers of Heavy metal and how metal is used to form identity, community, power, and gender. These and several other texts were instrumental in the foundation of metal studies as a field but as they pertain mainly to mainstream Heavy metal bands they are little relevance to this current study. It is after these books that mark the emergence of "academic-fans (established scholars who have "come out" as fans of popular culture) and fan-academics (ex-fans who have successfully parleyed their insider knowledge into an academic career) which explains the growth and scope of the approaches towards metal.¹¹

Though not a scholarly work, the book *Lords of Chaos: The Bloody Rise of the Satanic Metal Underground* (2003) by Michael Moynihan and Didrik Sørderlind has had a vast influence within the black metal community and on the academic study of black metal. The book is confused in purpose as it starts as a history of Satanism in music that morphs into a sort of true

¹¹ Andy R Brown. "Heavy Genealogy: Mapping the Currents, Contraflows and Conflicts of the Emergent Field of Metal Studies, 1978-2010." *Journal for Cultural Research* 15:3, 217.

crime novel recounting the crimes of the Norwegian Black metal scene in the early 90s focusing on Varg Vikernes and Euronymous of Mayhem. The book ends with a sociological look at Satanism and nationalism that does not fit with the beginning of the book. Regardless of its faults there is a reason it is included in most bibliographies of metal studies.

The first published book that had a main focus upon the extreme metal subgenres was Keith Kahn-Harris' *Extreme Metal: Music and Culture on the Edge* (2007). In *Extreme Metal*, Kahn-Harris explains the location of the subgenres within their specific 'scenes' and what belonging to these groups entails such as the accumulation of 'subcultural capital'. He also introduces the concept of 'reflexive anti-reflexivity' which is how he explains the extreme but contradictory sentiments expressed by numerous extreme metal musicians that are undoubtedly racist and hateful in content but not actually meant as such.¹² This Kahn-Harris argued is sometimes used as a tool in order to maximize transgressive potential of a statement without becoming entrenched in racist/fascist activity that would attract attention to the band but away from the music.¹³ Subcultural capital is important for scholars of metal as while not mandatory it is helpful for someone who studies metal academically to understand the music, its scenes, and culture.

As acceptance of the field of metal studies grows and scholars from various and diverse scholarly fields approach the study of metal from their respective disciplines the body of work relating to metal has increased and according to a study looking at metal studies in the period of 1978-2010 more than half (56.7%) of publications on metal have been within the past decade.¹⁴ The most common approaches to metal have been psychological, sociological, or anthropological but there have also been contributions from theology, gender studies, ethnomusicology, political science, leisure studies, economics, cultural studies, and even physics.

¹² Keith Kahn-Harris. *Extreme Metal: Music and Culture on the Edge*. Berg, Oxford, 2007. Pp144-156. An example of this would be the controversy relating to Darkthrone's *Transilvanian Huger* album that included the statement, "If any man should attempt to criticize this LP, he should be thoroughly patronised for his obviously Jewish behaviour." Which they then tried to explain away by saying it was not meant to be anti-Semitic but that the word Jew was used in Norway as slang when something is out of order. The album still had the phrase "Norsk Arisk Black Metal" emblazoned upon the back.

¹³ Op cit 152-3

¹⁴ Brown 218.

Previously it was common for scholars to embark upon metal studies as a hobby or secondary to their main research out of preference for more ‘serious’ study but now the field is constantly being added to by an influx of new students as evidenced by the increase of MA theses and PhD dissertations about metal. The ones relevant to Black, Folk, Viking metal and therefore this thesis include: Benjamin Olson’s “I am the Black Wizards: Multiplicity, Mysticism and Identity in Black Metal Music and Culture” (2008) which focuses on the three aspects of Black metal he thinks characterizes the subgenre which are conflict between radical individuality and group identity, the romanticized nature and idealized past, and the celebration of the primal and irrational. Gry B. Mørk’s “Drommer om fortiden, minner for fremtiden: Norsk black metals norrøne orientering 192-1995.” (2002), examines how the dreams of the past influence the desires for the future. Anders Holstad Lilleng’s “<Lenkene er brutt>: Norrøn mytologi i norsk black metal-en nærlesing av et utvalg Enslaved-tekster fra perioden 1994-1998.”(2007), which specifically looks at the Viking metal albums of the Norwegian band Enslaved. Aaron Patrick Mulvany’s “ ‘Reawaking Pride Once Lost’: Indigeneity and European Folk Metal” (2000) which attempts to determine what messages the musicians hope to encode by using folk texts and the difficulties of intentionality. G.F.P. Segers “A Blaze in the Northern Sky: Black Metal as an expression of extremist politics in modern day Europe” (2012), which draws comparison between black metal musician Varg Vikernes and the terrorist Anders Breivik. Jason Forster argues in his “Commodified Evil’s Wayward Children: Black Metal and Death Metal as Purveyors of an Alternative Form Modern Escapism” (2006), that by embracing evil and cultivating indifference to the plight of others is a coping mechanism for the inequities of life.

Looking at Viking metal in particular the following articles have been published. Imke Von Helden has presented three papers on Viking metal in the “Heavy Fundametalisms: Music, Metal, and Politics” conference series titled: “Scandinavian Metal Attack! The Power of Northern Europe in Extreme Metal” (2009), “Barbarians and Literature: Viking Metal and its Links to Old Norse Mythology” (2010), and “A Furore Normannorum, Libera Nos Domine!- A Short History of Going Berserk in Literature and Heavy Metal” (2011). Also in the Heavy Fundametalisms series was Florian Heesch’s paper on “Metal for Nordic Men: Amon Amarth’s Representations of the Vikings” which explored masculinity within the Viking metal scene.

Viking metal has also been recently receiving attention from other medievalists. The book *Mass Market Medieval* included the article “Antichrist Superstars: The Vikings in Hard

Rock and Heavy Metal” by Simon Trafford and Aleks Pluskowski which provides a very basic overview of Vikings in rock and metal.¹⁵ Viking metal was also rewarded mention as something of an oddity in the chapter on “Medievalisms in Music and the Arts” in the rather new publication *Medievalisms: Making the Past in the Present* (2013) by Tison Pugh and Angela Jane Weisl.

The recent development of the International Society for Metal Music Studies and the introduction of their new journal *Metal Music Studies* will surely increase the range and scope for the academic exploration of metal in the future.

From Satan to Odin- A Basic History of Black and Viking Metal

Satan in Heavy Metal

Many hard rock and heavy metal bands have flirted and exploited Satanic imagery but few took it further than a controversial promotional gimmick or as a means of transgression. Highly influential and possibly the first band that can be termed ‘heavy metal’ is Black Sabbath. They use imagery of Satan within a very religious (even Catholic) framework in which Satan and the threat of damnation were subjects of fear and not of worship and praise. They ensured, however, the occult would be a mainstay in metal to come. Metalheads of the 70s and early 80s largely remained apolitical and, for the most part, irreligious.¹⁶ While quasi-Satanic and occult imagery were employed it was to emphasize rebellion, freedom, and not meant to be taken seriously.¹⁷

Crucial to the development of extreme metal and particularly black metal was the English band Venom who with their 1981 album *Welcome to Hell* took Motörhead’s minimalist, punk-influence sound, distorted it further, and added Satanic themes. Their brand of Satanism was only a promotional technique as they had seen the attention and controversy garnered by the tongue-in-cheek bands like KISS and figured an overt celebration of Satan could sell even more

¹⁵ The article is unfortunately littered with little mistakes that give the impression they do not actually know Black and Viking metal i.e. calling Vikernes the leader of the band Burzum when there are no other members or saying that scenes of Christian oppression are rare.

¹⁶ Deena Weinstein, Chapter 4

¹⁷ Benjamin Olson, p13.

records.¹⁸ The band never actually pretended or claimed to adhere to Satanism religiously despite how they were later interpreted by Norwegian black metallers in the 90s. Cronos, the vocalist of Venom, stated in Kerrang! Magazine in 1985 that, “I don’t preach Satanism, occult, witchcraft, or anything. Rock and Roll is basically entertainment and that’s as far as it goes.”¹⁹

Venom’s music had a very ‘primitive’ atmospheric sound because of poor producing due to lack of funds but this would become a feature in the later Black Metal scene in which bands would often seek out old and mismatched equipment to record with even if they could have afforded superior.²⁰ Their album art of a pentagram with a goat’s head in the centre below the Venom logo would become a sort of mandatory possession in the Norwegian scene. Venom also adopted the previously punk practice of utilizing pseudonyms: Cronos, Mantas, and Abaddon, a practice which once again was adopted by the later metal scene. With the release of the 1982 album titled *Black Metal* Venom gave the future subculture its name.²¹

King Diamond, the front man of the Danish band Mercyful Fate, elaborated upon Kiss’ makeup by adding an upside-down cross which was a precursor to the elaborate ‘corpse-paint’ makeup worn by most of the early Norwegian black metal bands. He was also and still is a member of Anton LeVey’s Church of Satan.²² This shows that the presence of Satanic ideology and its serious practice was present in Scandinavia and particularly within the metal genre.

In terms for music, the proto-Black metal bands Hellhammer/Celtic Frost²³ from Switzerland were the most influential as they exchanged the clear, fast-riffing, and solos of their contemporaries for droning, melodic chord progressions with bursts of ‘feral energy’.²⁴ They also wore white makeup with black rings around the eyes which was supposed to make them look dead. Hellhammer/ Celtic Frost emphasized atmosphere over speed and technicality²⁵ and

¹⁸ Op cit. p14

¹⁹ Moynihan and Soderlind, p12-14.

²⁰ Confirmed by both Fenriz and Varg Vikernes in the documentary *Until the Light Takes Us*

²¹ Musically, however, Venom’s music does not easily fit within the genre of Black metal today but it is a sort of ‘proto-Black metal’ (Olson, 15). Cronos has said that they should have gotten their own name like ‘corpse-paint metal’ or ‘Norse metal’ but not used their term because “Black metal is Venom”. (Interview Cronos *Black Metal: the Music of Satan*. Dir. Bill Zebub. Grimoire. 2011. DVD.)

²² Baddeley p127-128.

²³ Same band- changed names

²⁴ Oslen p16.

²⁵ Moynihan and Soderlind

can be said to mark the split between the bands that would influence black metal and those that would influence death metal.²⁶

Enter Quorthon

Thomas Börje Forsberg, much better known as Quorthon, started making music in Sweden under the name Bathory in 1983. His recordings appeared on various metal compilations within the European tape-trading circuits that were the life-blood of the underground metal scenes. Like early Venom, these had very poor production values and featured a buzzing wailing cacophony of sound. Bathory's 1983 album *The Return* was a true departure from anything previously released. Quorthon's vocals which ranged from high wailing shrieks to low croaking groans were a departure from the traditional singing practiced by most metal bands and would become characteristic of extreme metal in years to come. With *The Return* and *Under the Sign: the Sign of the Black Mark* (1987), Quorthon ostensibly created Black Metal.

Norwegian Black Metal (Second Wave Black Metal)

Around the same time that Quorthon started recording a group of young Norwegians had similar influences and ideas. Øystein Aarseth (Euronymous), Kjetil Manheim (Manheim), and Jørn Stubberud (Necrobutcher) created the band Mayhem in 1984. According to Gylve Nagell (Fenriz of the band Darkthrone), Euronymous invented the typical Norwegian Black metal riff. He said it "derived from Bathory but it was a new way of playing a riff that had never been done before".²⁷ Not only was Euronymous central to the creation of the sound of Norwegian Black metal but it was around him that the 'inner circle' of the Oslo black metal milieu formed. In 1988 Per Yngve Ohlin (Dead) moved to Norway from Sweden to become the vocalist of Mayhem. He was extremely depressed, obsessed with death, and had suicidal tendencies. He would often cut himself on stage or at parties, needing to be restrained by friends from bleeding out. Euronymous became obsessed with Dead's suicidal tendencies and would often encourage him to kill himself. On 8 April 1991, Dead slit his wrists and shot himself in the head with a shotgun.²⁸ It was Euronymous who discovered the body but before calling police he took pictures of the body and kept a couple pieces of the skull. Dead's suicide marked a change in mentality of the Oslo metal

²⁶ Olson p17.

²⁷ *Until the Light Takes Us*. Dir Aaron Aites and Audrey Ewell. Artists Public Domain. 2010. DVD.

²⁸ Bullets provided by Varg Vikernes

scene.²⁹ Euronymous' morbid reaction to finding Dead's corpse and his inclination to show off the pictures and skull fragments to friends at his record shop Helvete caused a rift between him and a number of his friends. Centred around his store/ home Euronymous gathered a community of like-minded and easily influenced younger males and the group mentality exacerbated tensions in which each tried to be more extreme to gain acceptance into the 'inner circle'. Bård Eithun (Faust) killed a homosexual man in Lillehammer in August 1992 and when he confessed his deed to Euronymous he was congratulated and told to come hide out at Helvete, and it was after he arrived when the two of them joined by Varg Vikernes burned down Holmenkollen chapel in Oslo. That Faust had not be caught for the murder despite widespread knowledge of his guilt within the metal community caused a feeling of invincibility and people looking for approval from Euronymous conducted copycat church burnings. Metalheads burned down over fifty churches in Norway including the medieval Fantoft Stave church.

Reasons given for the church burnings range from attempts of outsiders trying to prove their evilness in order to impress Euronymous to retaliation against Christianity for destroying pagan sites. An anonymous commentator in the documentary *Once Upon a Time in Norway* said that "by burning churches, some people felt it was like taking back the land from the 'Middle Eastern plague' as many people called it. And it was no worse doing it now then it was in the year 900." The Norwegian media, however, started a nationwide panic over Satanism and claimed Satanic sacrifices had been committed at the churches and claimed that there was an organized Satanic terrorist organization.³⁰ The actual beliefs of prominent band members are incredibly difficult to discern. Euronymous was known to appreciate Aleister Crowley's Satanism of "Do what thou wilt" and supposedly disliked the Satanism of Anton LeVey. Euronymous claimed to believe in a personified Satan³¹ but Manheim stated that (at least while he was in the band) they had "never sacrificed, worshipped Satan, or did rituals. It was all an image", and that "none of us had this as our belief or philosophical guideline".³²

²⁹ Interview Bård 'Faust' Eithun. *Once Upon and Time in Norway*. Dir. Pål Aasdal and Martin Ledang. Grenzeløs Productions. 2007. DVD.

³⁰ See *Satan rir media* (Satan rides the media, 1998) by Torstein Grude for extensive footage of the Satan media panic in Norway.

³¹ Lahdenperä, Esa. Interview Euronymous. *Kill Yourself! Magazine* August 1993. Print.

³² Interview Kjetil Manheim. *Once Upon and Time in Norway*. Dir. Pål Aasdal and Martin Ledang. Grenzeløs Productions. 2007. DVD.

The chaos surrounding the black metal scene culminated on 10 August 1993 when Varg Vikernes (of Burzum) killed Euronymous. Vikernes claims he was acting in self-defense because Euronymous had threatened to kill him (Euronymous apparently frequently issued death threats). He was sentenced to 21 years in prison for the murder and a number of the church arsons.³³ After Euronymous' death the scene in Oslo largely dismantled without a leader, some scene members seem to have expressed regret while others were relieved to no longer have to deal with his authoritarian 'black metal police' attitude anymore.³⁴ While the physical scene fell apart the music continued to be made.

Here come the Vikings

Around 1986 when the Norwegian scene was focused on whether people were evil enough and illegal activities which drew attention away from the music, in Sweden Quorthon decided that he "wanted to replace the whole demonic & satanic bag with something that was pure from christian and satanic bullshit."³⁵ He realized that

we were actually just writing albums full of religious hocus-pocus, satanic rubbish and demonic crap. I was not a Satanist and know absolutely nothing about occultism or demonic affairs, so I asked myself why should I be writing about that shit? ... That's when the idea to bring the whole pre-christian Swedish Viking era into BATHORY came about. Not that I knew any more about that period of time, but it was at least a fresh source to draw stories from.³⁶

In 1988, Bathory released *Blood Fire Death* which featured the National Romantic painting *Åsgardsreien* by Peter Nicolai Arbo from 1872 on the cover. Musically and lyrically it was not a big departure from their previous work until the last song which describes a 'warrior of thunder and rain' on a 'chariot of thunder and gold' who is coming 'to set you free of your chains' with a 'hammer of steel' and lead people to a place where 'the souls of the ancient ones

³³ He was released after serving 16 years.

³⁴ *Once Upon a Time in Norway*.

³⁵ Interview Quorthon. <http://www.anus.com/metal/about/interviews/quorthon/>

³⁶ *ibid*

reign'.³⁷ *Blood Fire Death* is frequently called the first example of the subgenre "Viking Metal" but it is the next album that marks a true shift from their previous work and that of the rest of the metal genre so far. *Hammerheart* was released in 1990 and features a clean but still rough voiced Quorthon, atmospheric and environmental intros, soaring choirs, and orchestration. With *Hammerheart* the subgenre of 'Viking metal' was created.

Vikings in Heavy Metal

Vikings had been occasional lyrical material in the heavy metal movement but prior to Bathory they had never been the sole focus of an album or band. Led Zeppelin used the Viking age as inspiration for the songs "Immigrant Song" (1970) and "No Quarter" (1973) in which there is a romanticized vision of stereotypical 'Viking' behaviours of sea-borne voyages, violence, and adventure. Neither the songs nor the band explicitly say that they're singing about the Vikings but it is meant to be understood by the audience. Zeppelin and other hard rock bands occasionally used popular Viking iconography as inspiration for a handful of songs but never were the Vikings the bands' sole subject, they were just one of many easily used and identified subjects that could be chosen such as insincere Satanism, loose women, motorcycles, etc. that are common in Heavy Metal.³⁸ The widely mocked yet loved band Manowar who dressed in loincloths and leather incorporated all things barbarian including the Vikings into their lyrics and band imagery. Their use of the 'Vikings' seems to be more based upon Conan the Barbarian than any historical knowledge or source material and for them the Vikings were archetypal barbarian male figures.³⁹ The heavy metal bands that included a handful of Viking themed songs in their discography did not bother with the historical actuality of the Vikings and they did not attempt to make any national or religious connections between themselves and their subject matter unlike Bathory and extreme metal bands after the 1990s.

Folk Metal

³⁷ "Blood Fire Death". *Blood Fire Death*. Black mark Productions. 1988. CD.

³⁸ Trafford, Simon and Aleks Pluskowski. "Anti-Christ Superstars: The Vikings in Hard Rock and Heavy Metal". *Mass Market Medieval: Essays on the Middle Ages in Popular Culture*. Edited by David W. Marshall. McFarland. North Carolina, 2007. P60.

³⁹ Trafford and Pluskowski p62.

In the 1990s a new subgenre called ‘folk metal’ arose when bands started fusing heavy metal with folk music often using traditional folk instruments and, to a lesser extent, folk vocal styles.⁴⁰ The first example of this style is the English band Skyclad who released their album *Wayward Sons of Mother Earth* in 1991. In the mid-90s other bands in Europe, South America, and Israel started incorporating their regional folk music into metal. Despite there being a growing number of bands the sub-genre did not gain significantly in popularity until the 2000s when a boom of Finnish bands seemed to explode upon the scene. These bands included Finntroll, Amorphis, Korpiklaani, Ensiferum, and Turisas. Some folk metal bands have a large number of participants and feature a broad range of folk instruments in studio and for live performances but the majority of bands rely upon keyboards to replicate the sound of the folk instruments. The sound of bands termed folk metal can be incredibly varied depending on the style of metal and the style of folk the band chooses to blend and the atmosphere of the music can range from happy danceable music to the mellow or the melancholic. Subject matter of these bands spans from sword and sorcery style fantasy, medieval epics, Celtic and other regional mythologies, and, of course, the Vikings.

Black Metal Culture

I will most frequently be referring to Black metal as many of the themes discussed and the mentality with which they approached are indicative of broader black metal culture and not just to the bands that involve the Vikings.

Black metal is best defined by opposition. Black metal is a rejection of modernity. Black metalers reject modern society’s egalitarian secular social structures and consumerist culture. They use metal as a means to develop new identities and cultural meanings in what they view as a weakened and vapid modern world. Unlike other cultural musical movements such as punk black metal does not express interest in changing the present but instead a destruction of the present and a return to a more primitive existence. This millenarianism when combined with Viking themes leads to a desire for a modern Ragnarok and subsequent rebirth.⁴¹

⁴⁰ Mapofmetal.com

⁴¹ As will be discussed in further detail in Chapter 2

Black metal typically contains two strands of spiritualism that are preferable to the modern Christian or secular perspectives and those are Satanism and neo-paganism. Satanic bands tend to have a focus on violence and transgression while pagan bands turn more towards an idealized past and romanticized nature.⁴² While there are differences between the two strands the main similarity is the opposition to Christianity. All Black metal⁴³ defines itself based upon the glorification of the most negative aspects of Christian dichotomy.⁴⁴

Several studies have been conducted regarding the place of religion in black metal⁴⁵ but while I do not think the declarations of Satanic or pagan allegiances are mere tongue-in-cheek statements to boost record sales as such statements are barely transgressive anymore I am not convinced that the majority of black metalers are entirely serious about the level of adherence to their religious expressions of their music in their real lives. This is because many musicians despite their focus on religious and spiritual themes in their music are atheist/agnostic and while they write songs about wanting to destroy society and bring about a new world many have to function within society and many hold regular jobs apart from their metal careers. While metal music is filled with violent lyrics there have been very few violent outbursts apart from the incidents in the early 1990s by metalheads ‘in the name of’ metal or its related religious traditions. Even the church burnings of the 90s can be explained in the context of the acquisition of sub-cultural capital.

Subcultural capital, according to Sarah Thornton, is a way of providing status to an individual in their own social world.⁴⁶ To do this one must research the subculture and involve themselves in the processes and practices vital to it. In any metal scene this would involve any combination of: making music, attending shows, writing in fanzines or online message boards, dressing within the style, and acquiring music and merchandise while gathering knowledge of the scene. The harshness and inaccessibility of the vocals is also endemic of this as “one of the pleasures this deliberate inaccessibility offers its fans is the notion that the music can only be fully comprehended by those who have invested time, efforts, and commitment in discerned the

⁴² Benjamin Olson. “I am the Black Wizards: Multiplicity, Mysticism, and Identity in Black Metal Music and Culture. MA Thesis. Bowling Green State University, 2008. P 39

⁴³ Besides the specific Christian Black Metal bands

⁴⁴ Or Islam in the case of the burgeoning anti-Islamic Middle Eastern Black metal bands.

⁴⁵ Bossius 2003; Olson 2008; Granholm 2011 for example.

⁴⁶ Thornton. 2005, 186

music's nuances".⁴⁷ In the early 90s the Black metal scene in Oslo centred around a core group of bands and the inner circle at Euronymous' record shop/home Helvete. They fostered evil reputations and after the Fantoft stave church was burned, possibly by Varg Vikernes⁴⁸ or someone else from the inner circle, a string of copycat arsons and grave desecrations spread as people who wanted to be accepted into the elite group vied for approval.

I think that for the majority Black metal provides a relatively safe milieu in which to artistically express all the negative emotions of life. It allows people to indulge in their darkest fantasies or discuss difficult issues not commonly examined in public without the threat of judgement or repercussions.⁴⁹ It is a means of catharsis and artistic fulfillment through which one can create preferential self and national identity that can be explored and shared within the Black metal scene. Many of the themes present in Black metal mirror those expressed in artistic and literary movements of the 18 and 19th century in terms of nostalgia for an idealized past and preference for a more primitive society.

⁴⁷ Michelle Phillipov. *Death Metal and Music Criticism: Analysis at the Limits*. Lexington Books. Lanham. (2012).

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⁴⁸ He has never admitted to the church arsons and refuses to pay the several million kroner fines demanded of him.

⁴⁹ I have noticed a correlation between Black metal and Scandinavian crime literature. Both frequently make people question how such violent material can come from Scandinavia which is seen as a very peaceful place.

Chapter 1: The North and Nation

*Land of unforgiving winter
Cold, clad in white, under a dark grey sky
Silent, the wind, it whispers
Pale sun of gold, gazing from far up high

Endless forests, lakes of water dark and deep
Misty mountains, where giants sleep

Nordland⁵⁰*

⁵⁰ Bathory. "Nordland". *Nordland*. 2002.

Construction of Ethnic Myths

The ‘middle’ of the Middle Ages allows for a canvas upon which to paint romantic or fantastical images of how a person or group thinks the past should have been. Because of the medieval period’s long relegation as a ‘dark age’ between the highs of the Classical period and the Renaissance of which little was known it could be stripped of its actual history and used instead as a screen upon which to play out nostalgic fantasies.⁵¹ Fictions about history mold images of the past that and these will then be absorbed by, edited, and repeated by following generations. Music, films, art, and literature that draws upon this created history and are not concerned with historical accuracy but what feels authentic and truthful. New medievalisms create images of the past that resonate with existing cultural memories. No memory is purely individual but always shaped by collective contexts from what we have absorbed from everything surrounding us throughout our lives.⁵² This means that our initial biases and conceptions about the past have been formed and influenced by the various reincarnations we have consumed throughout our own history and our society’s including outdated historiography, art, and popular culture. Without further study to correct these biases many people continue to belief and accept these preconceptions as fact or to manipulate the aspects of them that they find appealing to suit their desires in the present day.

When a nation, group, or individual sets its origins back into antiquity they are aiming for a sense of authenticity and authority that a long history is seen to entitled them to. This also aids in the construction of an ethnic identity. An ethnic group, according to Immanuel Wallerstein, is a “cultural category of which there are supposed to be certain continuing behaviours that are passed on from generation to generation and that are normally linked to state boundaries.”⁵³ Anthony D. Smith developed six components of ethnic myths that are involved in the creation of a unified ethnic identity. I think this is a useful guide for looking at some of the major themes of

⁵¹ Helen Dell. “‘Yearning for the sweet beckoning sound’: Musical longings and the unsayable in medievalist fantasy fiction”. *Postmedieval*. 2(2011). 171.

⁵² Astrid Erll. “Cultural Memory Studies: An Introduction”. *Cultural Memory Studies: An International and Interdisciplinary Handbook*. Ed. Astrid Erll and Ansgar Nünning. Walter de Gruyter: Berlin. 2008. P5.

⁵³ Immanuel Wallerstein. “The Construction of Peoplehood: Racism, Nationalism, Ethnicity. *Sociological Forum* 2(1987). p.380.

Viking metal with. Metal is often construed as negative, transgressive, and/or destructive but it can be a constructive force by providing a means of creating and exploring alternative cultural identities to those offered by the influential majority in society.⁵⁴ While the processes of making the ethnic myths involved in Viking metal are similar to those used on the larger scale during the construction of their nations' national history during the 19th century they have come to some different conclusions or focus on different aspects of history to create their myths. Anthony D. Smith's six components of ethnic myth are: the myth of temporal origins; myth of location and migration; the myth of ancestry; the myth of the Heroic Age; the myth of decline; and the myth of regeneration.

1) The Myth of Temporal Origins

When creating a nationality and ethnic identity it is required to determine an origin to locate it in time and to compare it to other relevant communities.⁵⁵ The further back a known history stretches the better. The increased value of certain temporal categories leads to a hierarchy among past, present, and future in which the past becomes "the single source and beginning of everything good for all later times".⁵⁶ The origins of Scandinavia and its people are concealed in prehistory and obscured by myth. While many lineages of the sagas claim a biological genealogy with the gods rooted in euhemerism the metal bands tend to claim 'ideological' descent and claim a spiritual kinship with their Viking ancestors. Little attention is paid to any earlier generations as it is assumed that their roots are eternal and primordial until the corrupting influence of Christianization. Of the six components this is the least directly relevant to metal but some songs do recount the creation story.

1) Myth of Location and Migration

Space is an essential element in the construction of self-identity. There needs to be a distinct location or area in which a particular group is believed to belong. This space is often threatened by some outside force, one that either exiles the group from their space or infringes upon it. Considering the increase of globalization and immigration, there can be a feeling of

⁵⁴ Jeremy Wallach, Harris M Berger, and Paul D. Greene. "Affective Overdrive, Scenic Dynamics, and Identity in the Global Metal Scene. *Metal Rules the Globe*. Duke University Press. Durham. 2011, 23.

⁵⁵ Smith 63.

⁵⁶ Ana Marie Alonso. "The Politics of Space, Time and Substance: State Formation, Nationalism and Ethnicity". *Annual Review of Anthropology*. 23(1994), 388.

‘homelessness’ in the modern life. Nationalists create a ‘homeland’ out of ideas of spatial origins and held territory.⁵⁷

The issue of location is a very important but difficult concept in Viking metal. The line between a national and a broader Scandinavian identity in Viking metal is often blurred. Some bands choose to definitively state what country, if not region, the Vikings they are singing about are from. In the song ‘Svart Visdom’, the band Helheim say “på norsk jord vi star” and reminisce about the time “Da vi, vikinger av Norge hersket i det kalde nord / og skapte frykt med vårt sverd”.⁵⁸ With this they declare that Norwegians ruled the North during the Viking era and ignore the other countries involved. It makes sense that typically the Vikings are from the same country as the band so Sweden’s Unleashed commences the song ‘Onward Into Countless Battles’ with “off we sail from Svea shores” and they then return to Birka.⁵⁹ The Norwegian band Solefald wrote a two album ‘Icelandic Odyssey’ which includes a mention of the connection between the two countries with the lyrics “The Icelanders who hungered the Norwegians who died/ Before the doors of Hel, they had their strength tried/ Remember the hardships the toil they went through/ Remember the hardships the battles they lived through/ Our blood hails the North pagan Vikings stay true”.⁶⁰ The connection between the two remains strong as they are both groups of pagan Northmen being oppressed by imposing Christians. Enslaved describes Norway, or the “Kingdom of the Hammer” in the lyrics “Windswept landscape, desolated mountain plateaus/ The deepest woods and darkest scrubs/ Fjords and mountains are our landmarks in a life beneath the Hammer./ A long and narrow kingdom/ Ruled by trinity⁶¹/ From stormy mountain tops covered with snow/ We behold the kingdom of the Hammer.”⁶²

Sometimes bands take what is likely a more historically accurate route by declaring what area of the country they hail from. The song ‘Slaget i skogen bortenfor’ by Enslaved specifies that the fighting men come together from Hordaland, Rogaland, and Adger.⁶³ The band Windir that has often been labelled as Viking metal despite their focus on the much later Sverre

⁵⁷ Smith 64.

⁵⁸ Helheim. ‘Svart Visdom’. *Jormundgand*. 1995.

⁵⁹ Unleashed. ‘Onward Into Countless Battles’. *Shadows in the Deep*. 1992.

⁶⁰ Solefald. ‘Sagateller’. *Black for Death: An Icelandic Odyssey Part II*. 2006.

⁶¹ Odin, Thor, and Frey.

⁶² Enslaved. ‘Living Beneath the Hammer’. *Vikingsligr Veldi*. 1993.

⁶³ Enslaved. ‘Slaget i skogen bortenfor’. *Hordanes Land*. 1993.

Sigurdsson have been credited as starting a new minor subgenre of Black metal because of their unique sound which has been named 'Sognametal' for their use of lyrics in the *sognamål* dialect from the Sogndal area of Norway.⁶⁴

While there are the occasional references to a particular homeland it is far more common to see more general references to the 'men of the North' or Norse/Northmen. This involves a pan-Scandinavian approach which implies a unity of ethnicity and purpose caused by the habitation in harsh landscapes and climates that generated the impetus and character necessary for the Vikings to exist. It also portrays a unified pagan North against the foreign Christian forces. So, while a specific location is not necessarily explicitly important, the location in 'The North' is crucial with its harsh landscape featuring mountains, fjords and brutal winter weather. This may be a contributing factor in the dearth of Danish metal when compared to the prominent scenes of the other Nordic countries. Norwegians in particular are frequently seen as being especially connected to nature and in the 19th century the natural sciences that focused on what were seen as uniquely Norwegian geological traits became a sort of national science.⁶⁵

2) Myth of Ancestry

This myth involves a belief in a symbolic kinship link between all those in the current generation and to all its forebears back to a common ancestor.⁶⁶ The principle of filiation that travels through all known generations is seen to act as a conduit for certain spiritual values within the lines of descent. Adhering to these truths would then be the solution to the problems of the modern world.⁶⁷

Sometimes, however, it seems as if the intervening generations between the Viking Age and the present are superceded and ignored as those are generations in which Christianity took over and flourished. But, it is believed, that the 'Nordic spirit' and the 'wisdom of the ancestors' are maintained in the blood to be eternally passed down until it was time for the old truths to resurface and come again to life. The focus on the past, whether real or imagined,

⁶⁴ Bands that fall under this subgenre label are typically from this same area and often contain members from Windir as the band disbanded in 2004 after its creator Terje "Valfar" Bakken was caught in a snow storm and died of hypothermia. Hail Valfar!

⁶⁵ Myhre 20.

⁶⁶ Smith 64.

⁶⁷ Ibid.

before the advent of Christianity and this construction of an eternal filial bond allows for the gap between the past and present to be bridged and ideally modernity is transcended altogether in preference for a future made the their image of the past.⁶⁸

3) Myth of the Heroic Age

Every nationalism requires a touchstone in the past to provide it with guide to values, virtues, and heroism. This is because an ethnic group can only extrapolate meaning for its future from the idea of a pristine Golden Age populated by heroes.⁶⁹ According to Smith, in these ethnic myths there is little distinction made between myth and history, since myth was simply seen as a poetic form of history, an “archetypal set of motifs thought to embody the real ‘essence’ of the people and the true character and individuality of the community”, and involved a hero that mirrored the best of the community.⁷⁰

The Viking Age is obviously considered Scandinavia’s Golden Age by Viking metal bands. Their heroes are the Vikings whom to them embodied all the traits they feel are lost in modern society. The importance of heroic archetypes may explain why many of the stories told in lyrics resemble a type of Tolkienized fantasy rather than and accurate historical portrayal or the saga stores. Tolkien’s universe provides a medieval-like environment for black metallers to escape within where they do not have to deal with the messy realities of dealing with actual history. Using a Tolkienized version of the Middle Ages allows metalheads to utilize the aspects of Old Norse mythology and folklore that they appreciate and can understand and superimpose it upon the Viking Age.⁷¹ Tolkien’s Middle-Earth is the fantastical and ideal world that they wish the Viking Age had been. The Hobbits and Elves have the connection to the earth they feel humans should have, the Rohirrim are the noble warrior culture with Anglo-Saxon if not Viking ties, and the evil characters in *The Lord of the Rings* are easy enough to romanticize. At times it is difficult to discern whether lyrics refer to an actual idea of Ragnarok or reference Tolkien’s representation of Ragnarok.

⁶⁸ Olson 68.

⁶⁹ Smith 65.

⁷⁰ Smith 66.

⁷¹ Benjamin Hedge Olson. “I am the Black Wizards: Multiplicity, Mysticism, and Identity in Black Metal Music and Culture.” Master’s Thesis for Bowling Green State University. 2008, 85.

4) Myth of Decline

A Golden Age cannot be indefinite and so it is defined by a period of decline and denigration in which the old values were forgotten and weakness overcame the heroes. This myth describes how a nation lost its way and how the community lost its anchor in tradition.⁷² In Norwegian historiography 19th century national historians had also delineated a golden age and period of decline but they placed it later in the medieval period in the High Middle Ages. They mark the period of decline after 1319 when Håkon V died without an heir and Norway needed to join less-than-favourable personal and political unions of Sweden and Denmark.⁷³ 19th century historians looked back to a time of independence for Norway and drew strongly from Old Norse language, the sagas, and other medieval differentiating factors.

In Viking metal this decline is firmly blamed upon the influx of Christianity. As will be detailed in the next chapter on the Vikings as anti-Christian warriors, Viking metal bands describe the conversion process to have been a bloody and treacherous one where brave faithful men were killed and the weak converted to a false foreign god. The Scandinavian people then are believed to have fallen into decline because they forsook their oaths to their ancestors and gods and abandoned the values that made them heroic.

5) Myth of Regeneration

With this myth there is a shift from explanatory myth and history to a call to action for an ideology.⁷⁴ The ideals, however, are intrinsically unattainable. In Viking metal this regeneration will occur after a Ragnarok-like final battle between the pagans and the Christians. This new world will be one where men are once again brave and the old values and beliefs can be freely practiced again. This idea is, as Smith considers all myths of regeneration “psychologically compelling if logically incoherent, they present the 'drama' of nationalism and its quasi-

⁷² Smith 67.

⁷³ Jan Eivind Myhre. “The ‘Decline of Norway’: Grief and Fascination in Norwegian Historiography on the Middle Ages”. *The Uses of the Middle Ages in Modern European States: History, Nationhood, and the Search for Origins*. Ed. R.J.W. Evans and Guy P. Marchal. Palgrave MacMillan: Houndsmills. 2010.

⁷⁴ Smith 67.

messianic promises alongside other quite realistic and concrete goals...”⁷⁵ The realistic idea of Viking metal would be the desire to protect nature or to honour one’s ancestry and lineage yet these are not desirable on their own.

On the Periphery- Finland, Iceland, and the Faroe Islands.

While the genre of Viking metal came out of the established Black and Death metal scenes in Norway and Sweden some of the most popular and prolific Viking metal bands come from the other Nordic countries. The way they construct and maintain the cultural and national aspects of their own nationality while working with the Scandinavian-based themes of Viking metal can lead to some unique results. The popularity of the subgenre of Folk metal, which overlaps with Viking metal, is largely a result of a handful of Finnish bands that exploded upon the international metal scene in the early 2000s. They drew influence from traditional or traditional-sounding folk music, utilized themes and stories from various folk mythologies, and combined it musically with various other subgenre musical styles such as Black, Power, or Melodic Death metal. With the growing popularity of Viking metal, bands in countries such as Iceland and Faroe Islands that were involved in Viking age history refreshed the common themes in conjunction with their own national influences. Like much of the scholarship that has been done in these countries, some of these bands exult or at least admit connections to Scandinavian countries while others eschew any influence from the mainland.

Finland

Folklore played an enormous part in the construction of an independent Finnish nationality. Collection of folk stories and cultural relics began under the rule of the Swedish king Gustavus II Adolphus in 1630.⁷⁶ The myths found in the oral folk traditions played a huge part in

⁷⁵ Smith 68.

⁷⁶ Hannu Tolvanen. “The Quiet Past and the Loud Present: the Kalevala and Heavy Metal.” *Volume!* 5(2006). P76.

the developed of national identity and history as by 1816-17 the sage Väinämöinen was claimed by several authors as being historical.⁷⁷ The most important and influential collector of folk poems was Elias Lönnrot who published the first edition of the *Kalevala* in 1835 and expanded in the 1849 as well as “the Kanteletar” in 1840.⁷⁸ Folk poetry and the oral traditions were seen as historical sources which shed light on Finnish national antiquity. Imagery from early medieval Finland became a pervasive element of Finnish popular culture in the form of children stories and medievalized nationalism could be considered self-evident in Finnish society during the 19th century.⁷⁹ According to Derek Fewster the key elements of the construction of Early Medieval Finnish identity were the heathen ‘state’ church, monotheistic paganism, and a slow and violent conversion process.⁸⁰ Opposition to Catholicism is evident in the construction of early medieval Finland as evident by the frequent reference to the murder of Bishop Henry during the Swedish conversion of Finland. It is often used as an example of Finnish stubbornness and the desire of the “free Finnish peasant”. The ‘monotheism’ of Finnish paganism can be portrayed as ‘proto-Lutheranism’ as it is sometimes portrayed that the medieval Catholic church destroyed the previous society that was based upon democracy and equality and the Reformation was required for the restoration of proper peasant society. This opposition to Catholicism is later expanded by metal bands as an opposition to Christianity entirely but it has its roots in the tradition Finnish historiography.

Melodies from the *Kalevala* were largely neglected by popular music until the 1970s and really gained in popularity in the 1990s.⁸¹ It was during this time that it became increasingly acceptable in Finland to look at their own culture for inspiration instead of absorbing outside influence. The rise in folk metal can be largely explained by the increasing popularity of *Kalevala*-inspired folk music and the ‘a kantele to every school’ project that revived a an almost extinct form of music and meant that since the project commenced in 1985 most of the members of current folk metal bands would have experience kantele music in school.⁸² The first band to

⁷⁷ Derek Fewster. ““Braves Step out of the Night of the Barrows’: Regenerating the Heritage of Early Medieval Finland. *The Uses of the Middle Ages in Modern European States: History, Nationhood and the Search for Origins*. eds. R. J. W. Evans and Guy P. Marchal. Palgrave MacMillan: Houndsmills. 2010. p.37.

⁷⁸ Tolvanen 76.

⁷⁹ Fewster 2010, 49.

⁸⁰ Derek Fewster. *Visions of Past Glory: Nationalism and the Construction of Early Finnish History*. Finnish Literature Society: Helsinki. 2006. p.396.

⁸¹ Tolvanen 78.

⁸² Op cit 86.

extensively use the Kalevala as a lyrical source and inspiration was Amorphis. When later bands like Ensiferum and Turisas started making Viking metal they blended Kalevala myths with Norse and Finnish history with Scandinavian Viking age history. Other bands maintain

The band Ensiferum tends to utilize either Finnish or Norse myth interchangeably within the same albums. Their main protagonist in narrative is an unidentified pagan warrior fighting against Christian invaders. On album art this warrior is often depicted with a Finnish flag on his shield however very little in the songs explicitly ties him with Finland. Songs about the Finnish god Ahti can be alongside tracks entitled “The Wanderer” which is clearly about Odin. They sing about a great feasting hall in the sky where all brave men go to after death to be greeted by their brothers-in-arms and the gods but call it the Twilight Tavern instead of Valhalla. This seemingly confused jumble of references may be intentional to prevent seeming overly nationalistic. Imke von Helden uses the band’s live performance outfits of kilts (sometimes made from Finnish flags) and war paint as a tool in constructing hybrid identities.⁸³

The band Moonsorrow treats the subject matter rather differently. Their lyrics are almost exclusively in Finnish and one could argue that, despite containing all the themes of Viking metal, it may not technically qualify as such because it is never completely clear whether they are discussing the Vikings, general Northern pagan warriors, or specifically Finnish warriors. They frequently reference nature and the land like other bands but refrain from anything particularly identifying. One clue is that while Scandinavian Viking metal bands place their Christian enemy to the South while they are in the mighty North; Moonsorrow frequently references the invaders coming from the East. This would then mean that their enemies were Swedish crusaders in Finland and chronologically located a century or more after the end of the Viking age. Viking metal fans, if aware of the historical difference, are not that captious however and accept it as Viking metal because of the similar musical style and the general themes of pagan Northern warriors opposing foreign Christian imposition.

Turisas treats nationality different as well. Their concept album entitled *The Varangian Way* is about a group of eastern Vikings (making reference to Swedes while the main character

⁸³ Imke von Helden. “Scandinavian Metal Attack: The Power of Northern Europe in Extreme Metal”. *Interdisciplinary.net’s Heavy Fundamentals: Metal, Power, and Politics Conference*. Ed. Rosemary Hill and Karl Spracklen. 2010. p

has a Scandinavian name while being from somewhere in the Baltic region) on their way to Miklagard/Constantinople. This album is discussed further in the case study at the end of this thesis. They neglect any connection to Finland in the main story concept but they include the song “Cursed be Iron” which tells the story of the creation of iron and its use as a weapon from the Kalevala alongside a rather nationless narrative. On other albums they jump historically and geographically from stories of the Finnish cavalry that fought for Sweden during the Thirty Years’ War, to the Varangian Guard and Harald Hardrada, to the use of Greek fire by the Byzantine Empire. In some respects their self-designated term “Battle metal” is a more encompassing term for most Viking metal bands.

Viking metal in Finland leads to various incarnations of nationality that can manifest in the creation of blended hybrid nationalities, subtle inflections of national history, or the complete disregard to personal national history in lieu of a more general approach.

Iceland

The use of the Sagas in the creation of Icelandic and Scandinavian identity has been, to say the least, a contentious issue. The nationalization of medieval culture by the Icelanders came into conflict with the nationalist interpretations of the same medieval heritage by the other Nordic countries.⁸⁴ While Norwegian scholars would portray medieval Iceland as a minor branch of the Norwegian national tree the Icelanders insisted that they and the Norwegians were two separate nations as early as the 10th century and while strong political and cultural connections remained Icelandic literature was a unique and homegrown creation that the Norwegians had no claim to.

This disconnect can still be seen in the modern metal scene. The Icelandic band Sólstafir has emphatically insisted at numerous occasions that they are not Viking metal. Like the Finnish Moonsorrow however they bear many similarities musically and thematically with the Viking metal scene regardless of whether they actually sing about Vikings. Their first EP *Til Valhallar*

⁸⁴ Guðmundur Hálfhanarson. “Interpreting the Nordic Past: Icelandic Medieval Manuscripts and the Construction of a Modern Nation. *The Uses of the Middle Ages in Modern European States: History, Nationhood and the Search for Origins*. eds. R. J. W. Evans and Guy P. Marchal. Palgrave MacMillan: Houndsmills. 2010. p.55.

and first album *Í Blóði Og Anda* are both steeped in Norse mythology which for many people is enough to classify them as Viking metal. While they depart from distinctly Norse themes in their later albums they still maintain pagan themes and some of their merchandise is emblazoned with the phrase: “Anti-Christian Icelandic Heathen Bastards”.

Another Icelandic band is Skálmöld who do not eschew the Viking metal label. Their first album *Baldur* is not about the Norse god but is a concept album telling the tale of an Icelandic Viking who embarks on a quest for revenge through the harsh Icelandic landscape after a supernatural creature murders his family. The second album *Börn Loka* is about a man named Hilmar who is asked by Odin to fight the children of Loki. The lyricist Snæbjörn Ragnarsson utilizes the inspiration from the Icelandic Sagas and the Eddas to create his own original stories that blend the traditional narratives with the modern influences of *The Lord of the Rings* and *Dungeons and Dragons*. Ragnarsson uses traditional rhyming techniques from the sagas in his lyrics when it is possible to conform to the music which always has priority. In interviews he has gladly explained some of the basic principles of alliteration:

Ligg ég eftir langa drauma,
leggur stirður, hugur sljór.
Hatrið finn ég kröftugt krauma,
kreistir hefnd er fyrrum sór.
Heiðin býr að hættum blindum,
horfi ég mót svörtum tindum,
Hel býr þar í mörgum myndum:
myrkur, kuldi, ís og snjór.⁸⁵

As you can see, there are always two words in the first line starting with the same letter, and then the second line starts with a word beginning with the same one. This really makes the rhythm extra cool when it is properly done when you think about it and listen carefully. I am leaving out a whole bunch of nerdy rules; for example, you can use all vowels together as alliterative, but the consonants have

⁸⁵ Skálmöld. “Kvaðning”. *Baldur*. 2010.

to be the same. And if the letter “S” is used together with another consonant it has to be like that all the way (most of the time J).⁸⁶

In this regard Skálmöld could be argued to be the most authentic Viking metal band there is for actually engaging with the source material in ways that no other band comes close. They embrace the connection to the broader term of Viking metal even as a metal band they promote accessibility to outside listeners while maintaining a very strong and undeniably Icelandic standpoint. This is clearly seen by their popularity within Iceland.

Faroe Islands

Because of its insular location the Faroe Islands have maintained many aspects old language and culture. They have a strong oral tradition that is significantly later than most other countries looked at due to the suppression of the Faroese language during the Reformation and much of their traditional poetry was not written down until the 19th century.

The band TÝR claims that the authenticity of their music is what separates them from the rest of the Viking metal genre. This is because of the traditional Faroese folk music they incorporate into their metal that they claim that “Traditional music dating back to the Vikings, that is not preserved anywhere else in the world, not even in Iceland, is passed on in an oral tradition here [Faroe Islands] and it is still alive and well.”⁸⁷ Lyrically the band does not focus upon the Faroe Islands but much of their music is drawn from old Faroese folk music or music they try and make sound as authentically Faroese as possible with modern instruments.

Conclusion

Bands from outside the Scandinavian countries but within the Nordic category have unique ways of blending or accompanying Viking age material with their own national histories and culture to form their own style of Viking metal. They use language and traditional folk

⁸⁶ Snæbjörn Ragnarsson interview by Gemma Alexander for No Clean Singing. 2012. <http://www.nocleansinging.com/2012/12/17/an-ncs-interview-skalmold/>

⁸⁷ Interview Heri Joensen by Hrvatska Verzija. For CMAR net. http://www.cmar-net.org/interview/interview_tyr_2013_eng.php

music to differentiate their music from that of the Scandinavian countries and strive for authenticity or at least the feeling of. Bands may choose to accentuate aspects of their own nation's history or culture or blend it into a hybrid mixture of general Nordic themes, characters, and symbols or eschew their connection to the larger subgenre category. How each of these bands handles nationality displays the various ways metal can be used as a conduit and means of constructing national and/or ethnic identity.

Chapter Two: Vikings as Anti-Christian Warriors

*We go on by the light of the northern star
May the mighty Mjølner nail the bleeding
And naked Nazarene upon the pagan planks
Pound in the painful nails now and hang him high and dry
Or have we fallen too far to rise and closed our eyes?*⁸⁸

⁸⁸ TÝR. “By the Light of the Northern Star”. *By the Light of the Northern Star*. 2009.

“A furore Normannorum libera nos, Domine!”, an oft repeated but apocryphal quote that is said to have been the desperate plea cried throughout Western Christendom in the late 8th century after the Viking raid on Lindisfarne. For many years scholars took the annal entries of the monastics as the final word regarding the obvious brutality and savagery of the Vikings. Gradually the historiography has progressed to take a much more encompassing look at Viking age people and has expanded their role from merely raiders and rapists to traders and settlers. Sometimes the trend is to go too far in emphasizing the latter aspects to the exclusion of the brutality of the early raids. One group of whom this cannot be said is Viking metal creators. They relish the brutality of the early raids and expand the Vikings’ roles from mere raiders to those of anti-Christian crusaders. This is firmly rooted within the framework of extreme metal and its opposition to society, modernity, and especially religion.

The shift from using Satanic imagery to Viking imagery in Black metal was a rather easy transition as they can both be used for the same purposes of opposing Christianity. Depending on the brand of Satanism there was generally a focus on individualism, violence, and a celebration of chaos. Norse mythology is seen as being more personal and individualistic as opposed to the collective submission needed by the Christian faith, the violence of the Viking raids are obvious and with the violence comes an idea of chaos and bloody disorder which is especially embodied in images of berserkers. The same attitudes and opinions are being expressed simply using a different focus subject. To many musicians, the pre-Christian national figures of the Vikings felt more natural and organic than the sensationalist Satanic imagery. In order for there to be a Satan to worship or discuss then a belief in a Christian god must be accepted. Satanism is, by definition, "parasitic on Christianity, in that Satanists consciously define themselves in opposition to Christians and characterize their practices by contrasts them with Christian practices."⁸⁹ Many bands were not interested in continuing to use what is essentially Christian language and value systems to represent themselves and the pre-Christian Norse provided an apt replacement. Despite this they have never escaped the fact that their self-definition is firmly rooted in opposition to Christianity. Quorthon explained in the liner notes of the 1996 album *Blood on Ice* that:

⁸⁹ Jean La Fontaine, “Satanism and Satanic Mythology,” in Bengt Ankarloo and Stuart Clark, eds, *Witchcraft & Magic in Europe: The Twentieth Century* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1999), p.88.

I came to the personal conclusion that this whole satanic bit was a fake: A hoax created by another hoax - the Christian church, the very institution and way of life that we wanted to give a nice big fat ball breaker of a kick, by picking up the satanic and occult topics in our lyrics, in the first place...Since I am an avid fan of history, the natural step would be to find something in history that could replace a thing like the dark (not necessarily always the evil) side of life (and death). And what could be more simple and natural than to pick up on the Viking era?⁹⁰

This natural feeling is linked to the perceived innate connection with their ancestors through blood and heritage and the glorification of the 'dark' aspects of life will be further discussed in chapter three.

Conversion and Oppression

The opposition to Christianity is frequently expressed by emphasizing the opinion that Christianity is a foreign religion that does not belong in Europe in general and most particularly not in Scandinavia. This emphasis on the foreignness of Christianity and the feeling of it not belonging in Scandinavia is expressed lyrically with themes of a forceful or treasonous conversion and the oppression of the pagan people. The band Gungnir said in an interview that "Norway, like the rest of Europe, is under Judeo-Christian law. This murderous faith forced our ancestors to convert to a religion imported from the desert. We're not Hebrews, we are Indo-Europeans and thus we want a European spirituality"⁹¹ The Bathory song "One Rode to Asa Bay" is about the arrival of Christian missionaries to Sweden who insisted the pagans build a church to save their souls. One pagan man objected:

A man of pride with the Hammer told new God
To build his house on own
And spoke loud of the Gods of their fathers
Not too long time gone
The rumours said the man with a beard like fire
And the Hammer in chain
By men in armour silenced was and by

⁹⁰ Bathory. *Blood on Ice*. 1996.

⁹¹ Gungnir in interview with Moynihan in *Lords of Chaos*. 2003. p356.

Their swords was slain

Those who did not pay the one coin
Of four to man of new God
Whipped was twenty and put in chains then locked
By their neck to the log (To the log...)
And so all of Asa bay did build
A house of the cross
Every hour of daylight they did sweat
Limbs ached because faith does cost⁹²
People who objected to Christianity and insisted on continuing the pagan faith were killed and those that refused to pay alms were whipped and chained for their sins.

The album art of Burzum's *Dauðis Baldr* has two complementary scenes of blond men. The first side titled 'Dauðis Baldr' has a man kneeling before some sort of churchman holding a horned helmet being baptised as his men watching on. Behind him is another man holding a naked infant and a bared sword implying that the man is only converting because the child's (perhaps his son's) life is at risk.⁹³ The other side marked 'Balder's Død' pictures a naked bleeding man kneeling before a man with a cross. He is making a fist in a symbol of defiance while there are other naked corpses around him on the floor and a man stands behind him about to swing a brutally spiked morning star.



Amon Amarth asserts that the spirit of the Nordic people is not built for a religion that encourages meekness and peace:

Our spirits were forged in snow and ice
to bend like steel forged over fire

⁹² Bathory. "One Rode to Asa Bay". *Hammerheart*. 1990.

⁹³ One may also note that aligned with Varg Vikernes' racist opinions the two churchmen have slightly darker features and dark hair as opposed to the array of yellow-blond Norwegians.

⁹⁴ http://www.burzum.org/img/covers/big/official/1997_daudi_baldrs.jpg

we were not made to bend like reed
or turn the other cheek.⁹⁵

The harshness of the northern climate and landscape requires a certain type of equally harsh personality in order to thrive. Dyer argues that the Northern European climate requires the following qualities, “The clarity and cleanliness of the air, the vigour demanded by the cold, the enterprise required by the harshness of the terrain and climate, the sublime, soul-elevating beauty of mountain vistas”.⁹⁶ The harshness is more inclined towards a warrior type personality rather than the passivity seen imbued by Christianity on converts.

If not a necessarily violent conversion then it is portrayed as being a deceitful or treasonous one. Christianity is often represented as an insidious poison infecting the minds of northern people. One example of this is from Enslaved’s ‘For Lenge Siden’ off their 1997 album *Eld*:

Then came the disease
The disease from the south
Deception and false knowledge
Infected our minds.⁹⁷

Another is Ensiferum’s ‘Heathen Throne’ which says:

They came with their troops,
Destroying land and roots.
Abominations under the sun,
They and their poisoned truth.

One by one my people fell,
Under their deceptive spell.
How many sons of the
North had to fall?
Before our eyes could see;
This isn't how it should be!⁹⁸

With this forceful conversion they present their ancestors as a colonized people. This perceived colonization and oppression of their ancestors is felt to continue to the modern day due to the

⁹⁵ Amon Amarth. “Thousand Years of Oppression”. *Versus the World*. 2002.

⁹⁶ Dyer, R. *White*, London: Routledge. 1997.

⁹⁷ Enslaved. ‘For Lengen Siden’. *Eld*. 1997.

⁹⁸ Ensiferum. ‘Heathen Throne’. *From Afar*. 2009.

continued Christian influence and the existence of state churches. Quorthon of Bathory was quoted in Aftonbladet as saying:

I feel, myself, like the lost son. For my entire upbringing here I was exposed to Christian propaganda. We are born into the Swedish [National] church whether we wish it or not. During school we get lessons on Christianity time and again. Then I was never interested in either religion or history. Christianity was, of course, the Jewish history. It was when I first read about the Viking Age and Asatru that I became interested.⁹⁹

This displays a connection he feels is intrinsic between Swedes/ Scandinavians and their ancestors as opposed to a connection to Christianity which is a foreign religion and tells the history of a foreign people.

The desire to idealize the past and avenge their ancestors aligns with what Marina Warner calls “roots revivalism- the politics of nostalgia”, which “can lead to reinvigorated pride among muffled or neglected peoples or groups: but remembering sufferings like the loss of home can also be made a pretext for vengeance.”¹⁰⁰ Indeed vengeance is a commonly stated goal in lyrics.

This perceived oppression has also been given as justification for the church burnings that occurred in the early 90s in Norway. Varg Vikernes said of the Fantoft Stave church¹⁰¹:

Originally the place was an old pagan holy site it was on top of a hill where our forefathers used to celebrate the sun. What the Christians did was to move this church from another place and not put it close to this holy site but on top of it in the midst of the circle- actually breaking up the circle. And on the pagan horg they put a big stone cross. So if they have no respect for the Norwegian culture, why on earth should Norwegians respect their culture?¹⁰²

⁹⁹ Aftonbladet December 16th 1985, translated and quoted in *The Runestone* magazine, 1996. Recopied in Moynihan, M. & Söderlind, D., *Lords of Chaos: The Bloody Rise of the Satanic Metal Underground*. Feral, Los Angeles, 2003, p19.

¹⁰⁰ Marina Warner. *Managing Monsters: Six Myths of Our Time*. Vintage, London, 1994.

¹⁰¹ Which he possibly burned down. He was convicted of the arson but has never confessed.

¹⁰² Interview Varg Vikernes *Until the Light Takes Us*. Dir Aaron Aites and Audrey Ewell. Artists Public Domain. 2010. DVD.

This perceived subjection of their ancestors and also the forced inclusion into the state churches of their countries allow the bands to appeal to a “national trauma” to strengthen a nationalist cause.¹⁰³

The opinion that the Nordic countries should never have been Christian is not expressly that of anti-Christian or anti-religious bands but is a more widespread common opinion held by Nordic metal fans. An example of this is the Finnish band Turisas who have never overtly expressed any religious opinions but included an instrumental track on their *Battle Metal* album titled ‘Katuman Kaiku’ which means the ‘Echo of Lake Regret’. Mathias Nygård recounts the local mythology about the lake that inspired the song in their tour documentary *Finnish Summer with Turisas*: “In the times of the Swedes trying to turn the people in these regions into Christendom. The people finally had to accept it but soon as they had left the region the locals went straight to the lake to wash off their baptism and return to their pagan habits for centuries to come.”¹⁰⁴

Revival and Holy War

Intrinsic to Nordic mythology is the cyclical nature of time with a cycle of destruction and rebirth even after Ragnarok. Thus, despite their defeat a thousand years ago the Norse gods are ready to once again rise and lead their followers- the true Nordic people- to victory over the decadent, weak, Christianized modern world. Entwined in references to Ragnarok are calls to a new type of holy war.

In a time not far from ours
The lasting cold will prevail
The utter darkness will cover all
Nothing will ever be the same
The great ice will lose its grip
Its water will flood the earth
Like an ever flowing stream
Death and rebirth¹⁰⁵

¹⁰³ Gardell, 5.

¹⁰⁴ Turisas. *A Finnish Summer with Turisas*. Century Media, 2008. DVD.

¹⁰⁵ Unleashed. ‘Fimbulwinter’. *Odalheim*. 2012.

In this song titled ‘Fimbulwinter’, Unleashed connects the myth of the Fimbulwinter found in *Vafþrúðnismál* in the *Poetic Edda* which tells of three successive winters directly preceding Ragnarok. It is during this time that:

Mother Nature takes back
what’s rightfully hers
Ragnarök the liberator
Death and rebirth¹⁰⁶

Ragnarok is seen as a liberator and a means for the earth to re-establish balance from a population that has destroyed it. Christianity is seen as being opposed to the natural state of being for both humanity and the natural world while paganism is seen as being aligned with nature. In Unleashed’s version of events the new world is given the name ‘Odalheim’ in which:

From the ashes of the old world
A new one begin to take form
At the end of the great winter
The new age was born
...
The winds of the aftermath
Sweeping the shores
Of our ancestor's land
Where we shall build once more.¹⁰⁷

Once the Fimbulwinter and Ragnarok have cleansed the earth from the corrupting influence of Christianity a place will be provided for the “warriors of Midgard” to rebuild in a new “age of the warrior”.¹⁰⁸ The choice of the name for this new world is an interesting one considering the word óðal in Old Norse means ancestral property and inheritance.¹⁰⁹ When the odal rune is used in carvings prior to a person’s name it typically denotes ownership of said object.¹¹⁰ This is then a declaration of ownership over this new land through claims of ancestral kinship which favours

¹⁰⁶ Ibid.

¹⁰⁷ Unleashed. ‘Odalheim’. *Odalheim*. 2012.

¹⁰⁸ ibid

¹⁰⁹ Geir T. Zoëga. *A Concise Dictionary of Old Icelandic*. University of Toronto Press, Toronto, 2004.

¹¹⁰ Terje Spurkland. *Norwegian Runes and Runic Inscriptions*. Trans. Betsy van der Hoek. The Boydell Press, Woodbridge, 2005.

them considering they are following the inherited belief systems as opposed to those who 'betrayed' their kin for Christianity. In another song, Unleashed calls for people to:

Join us in this holy war
Against the world and all it stands for
Crush the men of fashion's flow,
The slaves of Christ and the thralls of Islam.¹¹¹

Which is unique in the mention of Islam but in line with the fact that they are Death metal band which is a genre that typically focuses upon the present and the future as opposed to Black metal which, as demonstrated, has a nostalgia and preference for the past.

The Norwegian band Einherjer also uses the image of the Fimbulwinter in a song of the same name:

On the other side we'll stand
We're the strong
In another world we'll meet
You'll be suffering one
On the other side we'll fight
With swords of steel
In another world we'll win
You'll worship us and kneel
You'll be the suffering one
On the other side we'll fight
With swords of steel.¹¹²

They admit that they were previously beaten but in a new world the positions will be reversed and they will be the victors while the Christians will be the ones to suffer. This song ends with a vision of hope for the future in which again nature shall flourish and the unsowed fields will grow. The last line differentiates from the Unleashed's excited anticipation for Ragnarok but instead expresses dread for "the day Ragnarok take our lives away".¹¹³

The next song on Einherjer's album *Dragons of the North* is 'Storms of the Elder' and it lays out the reawakening of the old gods. The vocalist calls out to Odin to:

¹¹¹ Unleashed. 'Onward Into Countless Battles'. *Shadows in the Deep*. 1992.

¹¹² Einherjer. "The Fimbul Winter". *Dragons of the North*. 1996.

¹¹³ Ibid.

Let again Gungnir fly
 Into the chests of Giants,
 And release again the powers
 Of your eight-legged horse
 Ride again in front of the Oskorei
 And lead fear into hearts of men.
 Enlighten the path for those of the elder spirit
 And guide them into glory.¹¹⁴

As long as there are “embers of the lost faith” then it is possible to reawaken the old gods once the “flames of lie” are gone- “ceased by a dark and ancient plague”. In this instance the pagan religion is likened to a plague, this is possibly meant as a positive comparison due to the longevity and tenacity of belief despite attempts at eradication.

Another Norwegian band, Enslaved calls this time “The age of wolves” in the song ‘Svarte Vidder’ which directly harkens back to *Völuspá* in which this time is called a wolf-age. In this wolf’s age “the hordes of the one-eyed are riding once again” and “hammer crushes cross”.¹¹⁵ Opposed to the blooming nature of some other bands this song describes the landscape ruined by war and warns “Mother Earth/ expect your death”.

Warriors are gathered through the dream
 Re-conquering the old Norse throne
 Under new flags
 With the swords held high
 The ravens are flying, the one eyed watches
 Into the fog, shadows appear
 Falling icons in a holy war
 Black mountain plateaus the battle is won.¹¹⁶

This presents the battle as a type of shadowy and foggy dream. An interesting line is the “reconquering the old Norse throne/ under new flags”, as it is unclear whether the reference to new flags is due to now present national delineations that did not concretely exist in the early

¹¹⁴ Einherjer. “Storms of the Elder”. *Dragons of the North*. 1996.

¹¹⁵ Enslaved. ‘Svarte Vidder’. *Frost*. 1994.

¹¹⁶ Ibid.

medieval period or rather to a new more symbolic flag of metal, the music and the people involved, and the new representatives of the 'pagan spirit'.

The prevalence of scenes of Ragnarok and those of the earth's creation or rebirth suggests that though the Old Norse gods were defeated by Christianity in the year 1000, their return is inevitable and impending.

In this holy war, the songs are occasionally told from the point of view of a protagonist warrior in the battle and this warrior is often killed by a blow from behind. Since he was killed in battle fighting for his country/kin/gods it is seen as a good death and he will go to Valhalla and there is a level of shame implied towards the person who did the killing. The prevalence of the behind-the-back cowardly kill suggests that the only way for the opponent (which can be seen as a representative of Christianity) to win is through dishonourable and shameful actions. This is in line with the prior depictions of the conversion process and also displays the perceived lesser morals of Christianity.

The Superiority of 'Viking' Morality.

There is a common perception displayed in Viking metal lyrics that the Vikings held themselves to a strict moral standard that is superior to the Christian one. Their pagan 'Viking' morality is centred on ideals of bravery, loyalty, and honour. This is taken from previous pop cultural representations of the Vikings, outdated romantic nationalist scholarship, and a selective reading of *Hávamál*. The pagan morality is then typically placed in opposition to Christianity which is portrayed as hypocritical, dishonourable, and weak while being mentally, physically, and spiritually oppressive. It has then been perceived as weakening the Nordic people through its influence.

Almost every song that contains a battle has exhortations of the warriors' bravery, ruthlessness, lack of fear, and their acceptance of inevitable death. Some songs detail how a man is supposed to live like Amon Amarth's 'Live Without Regrets' from the 2011 album *Surtur's Rising*:

From birth we're taught how to survive
We're taught how war is waged
And there are no men now alive
Who stops our wild rampage

Light at heart we bide our bane

whatever death awaits!
Norsemen live without regrets
We accept our woven fates

So fearlessly we charge ahead
There is no time to hesitate

Don't despair, show no fear
Live your life without regrets
Don't despair and show no fear
In the face of a certain death

A coward thinks he'll always live
If it keeps himself from strife
Old age leaves no rest and peace
though spears may spare his life

We don't mourn a friend that fell
or dread the day we'll fall ourselves
Warriors don't go to Hel
'cause we know Ygg will greet us well!

...

So raise your horns to those who died
Let's drink to fallen friends tonight
Let's celebrate their glory life
We'll meet again in Valhall when we die¹¹⁷

This song lays out the major features of the morality expected of a warrior; they should not fear death or mourn the deaths of others because they will go to Valhalla if they die a proper death, that there is a shame in being cowardly and living to be old, and to honour those who have died with generous libation. In the first two verses there is a reiteration of the legacy theme in which knowledge of proper living and the sacred ways are passed through the family and that there is something inherent in the bloodline or in Norsemen that makes them especially brave. The legacy theme is particularly poignant in Bathory's song 'Father to Son' in which a father speaks to his new born son and tells him to:

Promise me my son to always
Cherish what is home to you
What is the truth and to
Defend all of your race

¹¹⁷ Amon Amarth. 'Live Without Regrets'. *Surtur's Rising*. 2011.

Never lose the values
I have taught to you
Always keep your moral and ideals
Do never bring your flag disgrace¹¹⁸

He also tells him to “Call upon the spirits of our fathers” for guidance when he faces difficulty, how to read and understand the signs his ancestors and gods are sending to him, to call out his father’s ‘hail’ when he has died, and finally that it is his responsibility to ensure that these values continue to be shared from father to son. Unleashed’s song ‘The Defender’ also recalls wisdom shared from father to son:

Strengthened by the words of his own father:
‘Son, you must be merciless and brave!
Never let them take an inch of land,’
No, he'd never let his family be raped
Never let them march upon his fields,
No, he'd never let his people be enslaved.¹¹⁹

These two songs focus on the protection of one’s land, family, and people. The bonds of kinship should be preserved at all costs.

The *Poetic Edda* is ostensibly the greatest source of material for the majority of bands that desire to surpass a superficial survey of the Viking Age from popular culture followed by the *Prose Edda*. The theme of kinslaying, vengeance, and their consequences pervade both the mythological and heroic cycles of the *Poetic Edda*. Loki’s betrayal of the gods and his blood-brotherhood with Odin through conspiring Baldr’s death by using Hodr sparked a chain of kinslaying which ultimately leads to Ragnarok. Loki arranged the death of Odin’s son. Odin then has a child whose sole purpose is to kill Hodr the same day he is born. “A brother of Baldr was born quickly: he started -Odin's son- slaying, at one night old”.¹²⁰ One brother accidentally kills his brother so the father begets another son to kill his other son. Loki flaunts his betrayals in Ægir’s hall in *Lokasenna*, after which he was bound with his own son’s entrails (so, yet another

¹¹⁸ Bathory. “Father to Son”. *Hammerheart*. 1990.

¹¹⁹ Unleashed. “The Defender”. *Victory*. 1995.

¹²⁰ Ursula Dronke. *The Poetic Edda Volume II Mythological Poems*. Edited with translation, introduction and commentary. Oxford: Clarendon/Oxford University, 1997. P. 15, verse 32.

familial murder) until he breaks free at Ragnarok to lead the charge against the gods. Ragnarok then is a collusion of various relations killing each other and then others claiming vengeance. Fenrir kills Odin, and Odin's son Vidar avenges him. Thor and the Midgardserpent exchange killing blows. It is truly a time when 'Brothers will fight and kill each other, sisters' children will defile kinship.'¹²¹ Amon Amarth picks up this theme of kinslaying at Ragnarok and applies it to the coming of Christianity in their songs 'Bloodshed' and '...and Soon the World Will Cease to Be' off their *Versus the World* album. 'Bloodshed' is the commencement of Ragnarok and focuses on two brothers who now have to fight against each other because one stands for truth (the old religion) and the other for faith (Christianity):

Midgard's cold and hatred reigns
Hunger and disease
Fenris is set free again
Chaos is unleashed

The storm of death sweeps the shores
Famine sweep the land
Ties of kinship is no more
Sons die by their father's hand

Two men meet on battleground
Their eyes are full of hate
By sacred oaths both are bound
Death will be their fate

They share the blood of once proud men
Yet foes they have become
One fights for truth, the other for faith
Perish has begun

Here comes the - Bloodshed
It's the age of - Bloodshed
Here comes the - Bloodshed
It's the age of - Bloodshed

Two brothers meet in battle heat
Both will die today
No victory and no defeat
Death is their only way

¹²¹ Op cit. Verse 44.

In their eyes is no remorse
They make their final charge
Thrusting their swords with mortal force
Piercing each other's hearts.¹²²

The following song on the album recalls the Fimbulwinter, the fire of Muspell, the wolf devouring the sun, Loki leading the army upon Naglfar, and Heimdall calling the gods to come to war. So, as with the Edda, kinslaying is a precursor to the destruction of the world. This then likens the perceived betrayal of kin, land, and faith during conversion to Loki's betrayal of the gods and thus also strengthens the connection between Christianity and treachery.

Hávamál is one of the most utilized and quoted poems in metal lyrics.¹²³ The most quoted section is the two verses pertaining to reputation. While everyone dies it is possible to have a type of immortality by being remembered by the next generations. To do that is to live by the precepts of bravery and honour as outlined above. A reputation of shame and dishonour can also be remembered. Shame is used by Ensiferum in the song "Blood is the Price of Glory" to mock the cowards who flee from battle:

But for some it's all too much
This honorable battle and bloodshed
They flee like a swarm of craven rats
Leaving their brothers to a certain death
The last furious men
They didn't fear death or pain
They held up their swords and shields
As winners they stood on the battlefield

...

Run away you cowards
We turn our backs on you
The shame that now stains your name
Will only brighten our glory

¹²² Amon Amarth. "Bloodshed". *Versus the World*. 2002.

¹²³ The reading of the poem is quite selective considering Odin's advice regarding moderation does not quite fit well with a musical genre which revels in excess. They also do not engage in the text on any critical level, as far as they are concerned the text has remained unaltered from pre-Christian times.

Those who fight till their last breath
And fall with honour
Their names and deeds shall live forever
Never to be forgotten¹²⁴

The fact that some men continued to fight while others ran off only heightens the reputation of the men who stayed behind. In a warrior based society it is considered more honourable to fight and die than to run away and survive. The greatest honour was to have your memory upheld in song and story.

As previously mentioned Christianity is seen as a weakening influence on the Nordic people. Bands express nostalgia for the past and disdain for modernity by harkening back to a time “long ago when the moral of man was high”.¹²⁵ In their opinion the world has changed for the worse and recollections of the past are filled with an atmosphere of regret and sorrow for what has been lost. They are mourning for the “home of the *once* brave”.¹²⁶

Conclusion

The perceived oppression of their ancestors by Christians is the impetus of Viking metal musicians to call for vengeance. This idea is couched in the language of Ragnarok-inspired millenarianism where a drastic social change is required and will come when the Norse gods reawaken and lead their army of true metal followers into the final holy war against the Christians. The idea that Vikings are ideal symbols of unbridled masculinity is revealed in the comparisons between the gods and Jesus and the Vikings versus the churchmen in which the Christians are portrayed as rather emasculated. Viking metal bands get their concepts of ‘Viking’ morality from pop culture references, Havamal, and a vague knowledge of Icelandic feudal Sagas. They believe this morality is superior to a weakened Christian one and lament that violence is no longer an acceptable way to resolve personal insults and believe that this results in a devaluation of honour.

¹²⁴ Ensiferum. “Blood is the Price of Glory”. *Victory Songs*. 2007.

¹²⁵ Unleashed. “Hero of the Land”. *Warrior*. 1997.

¹²⁶ Bathory. “Home of the Once Brave”. *Hammerheart*. 1990. Emphasis mine.

Chapter Three: *Mother Earth, Father Thunder*¹²⁷-Paganism and Nature

*Silent nights
On my ancestors ground
In the land of ice
Where the hooves of Sleipnir pound
Silent nights
And the oath is sworn
In the land of ice
As my son is born*¹²⁸

¹²⁷ Bathory. "Mother Earth Father Thunder". *Nordland*. 2002.

¹²⁸ Unleashed. "Land of Ice". *Shadows In the Deep*. 1992.

Nature Worship:

There is a joke in the metal community that ‘the Inuit have 40 words for snow. Immortal has 41’. The Norwegian landscape and harsh winter have always featured heavily within Black metal lyrics and bands frequently take promotional photos and album art in forested or wintery settings. Black metal has been said to derive its harshness from the climate and geography of the countries from which it originated. Norwegian Black metal musicians frequently reference the perceived unique geographical features of their homeland. The vastness of the mountains and the depth of the fjords and lakes along with the brutal winter cold and accompanying darkness all play a part in creating the harsh character and atmosphere needed for black metal. The long darkness of winter contributes to an almost national melancholy and the coldness and darkness that consumes the country for the majority of the year has been said to “sound like Black metal”.¹²⁹

Legacy

Often in lyrics and interviews metal musicians and fans express a feeling or desire for a personal relationship with the past. They feel intrinsically connected to their pre-historic ancestors. This provides them with inspiration and a longing to feel closer. Johnny Hedlund of Unleashed has said that, “The influences that I have are actually from my ancestors and from sitting in the countryside and feeling the power of nature- just by sitting here knowing that my grandfather’s father’s father was standing here with his sword... by knowing that you are influenced by it.”¹³⁰ The legacy is contained within the knowledge of one’s ancestors and their connection to the land. That there are stretches of uncorrupted nature where once a distant ancestor may have stood can be a powerful sentiment.

This legacy is not only tied to the land but lyrics also express a particular power that is within their blood which passes on sacred knowledge through the generations. This is closely tied to Jungian philosophy of ‘blood and soil’ which implies that ancient gods and goddesses are embedded within people’s DNA. Blood is thought to contain memories and divine truths are encoded within a collective ‘folk soul’.¹³¹ According to Jung, Wotan was the personification of a

¹²⁹ Mordichrist interview. *Black Metal Satanica* documentary. 2008.

¹³⁰ Moynihan, M. & Söderlind, pp. 179

¹³¹ Gardell, 77.

dominant psychic force peculiar to the Germans who did not die in the rise of Christianity but instead disappeared into the collective subconscious where he stayed hidden for over a millennium working anonymously to guide his people.¹³² This idea is evident in Thryfing's song "Urkraft":

En stärkande känsla som håller anden vid liv
Som överlever nornornas alla nycker
En kraft som segrar över alla fiender
Den slumrar i dina blodsband, men finns där kvar

Ett naturens väsen, själens bärande stomme
En förnimmelse från förr, i arv från våra förfäder
En ymnigt strömmande styrka, lika gammal som tiden själv

En odödlig energi, som i naturen frodas
i varje levande fors och sjö, i varje mäktig ek och reslig gran
Stilla den andas, lugnt och starkt
men ett vaket sinne ser och hör, hur den väcker själaminnen

I glömska den ligger, men ger givmilt när du är redo att ta emot
Redo att väcka din ande till liv
Dess källa är ousinlig, evig och öppen åt alla som bär den inom sig

Låt den ej för evigt sova!
Känn dess återkomst, likt något som saknats
En del av den du är, ett kall från ditt blod
Känn ditt arv, och hur nordens själ flyter genom dina ådror

Ett fåtal är vi som urkraften minnes
Evigt styrkta av en flamma som aldrig slocknar
Världen är höljd i mörker
men nordstjärnan leder oss till slaget på Vigrids slat.¹³³

This song tells of the 'soul memories' that reside within nature and oneself eternally that can only be heard by those with an alert mind who listen for them. The soul of the North flows within the blood and is passed down through the ancestral line. And if allowed to awaken it will lead the listener through the darkness of this world and into the final battle.

Bathory's song 'Father to Son' is a message of family devotion and continuance. A man has a newborn son and begins educating him in the ways of his people and his responsibilities to

¹³² Gardell, 211.

¹³³ Thryfing. "Urkraft" *Urkraft*. 2000.

his father and family. He tells his son to “call upon the spirits of our fathers/ long time gone with thunder/ Ask them for truth and courage/ when trouble is in your way”.¹³⁴ He continues to teach him how to listen to the ravens and the signs sent by the gods that so few can hear. The sounds of thunder are greetings from their ancestors and knowledge necessary to understand these messages must be known in the heart and continually passed on from father to son through eternity. He continues to list the traits necessary for an honourable pagan man and asks him to promise to honour him once he has been called to Valhalla. It is only through his son sharing this knowledge and honouring his legacy that a man may live on in the physical world as reputation and honour are a man’s worth.

Released on an album three years later, Unleashed’s song ‘To Asgaard We Fly’ seems as if it could have been written as the son of the man in Bathory’s song fulfilling his father’s wishes as it deals with many of the same issues. In the song a man has heard his father’s call and is taking up the quest and duty to protect the ‘land of the free’. While the father in Bathory’s song told his child to uphold his morals and ‘defend all your race’, this son is promising that ‘with sword and shield I stand on guard/ I’ll fight ‘til death, we’ll never part’, and declaring that ‘the spirits will never die.’ These songs both involve a physical kinship and passing on of knowledge and responsibility. There is also no clear dating to the song so these could be Viking age people speaking to their kin or modern people following the old ways.

Some musicians express that they feel the obligation to their ancestors and their country to continue the old traditions or at the very least make sure people never forget their foundations. Quorthon of Bathory said the following:

"Under the Runes" is, to begin with, my way of saying that regardless if it's in the sky, the land, or deep down in the oceans, we will fight for my father's gods' right to have a place in any form of discussion when we discuss Sweden... We tend to think of ourselves as modern, down-to-earth Protestant Christians- healthy Christians. And we never talk about how Sweden was prior to that, more than 900 years ago, because we have a history of 2000 years of being Asa-faithful, and just 970 years of Christianity. And if they don't want to talk about it, I'm prepared to fight any kind of war by the great hail, under the runes, for my father's gods. Because there are certain values, from those times, worth fighting for. And in creating havoc, being able to talk about what the song is all about, I wrote it so that it would be able to be taken as a Second World War song. Because then I

¹³⁴ Bathory. “Father to Son”. *Hammerheart*. 1990.

knew people would keep on picking out that lyric, and then I would keep having to answer questions about it and would get the idea out there.¹³⁵

He uses controversial language in order to attract attention to a different issue that he does not want people to forget. He believes that by writing these songs and discussing this subject matter he is doing his part to keep alive his ancestor's memories and the history of his nation. He is also saying that he would go to war to protect those memories and to converse the values that he sees as being particular to the past that are not prevalent today.

Som i mann så i ulv¹³⁶: The Wolf in Metal.

Wolves and/or werewolves have multiple uses in the lyrical content of Nordic metal bands and a spectrum of influence can be discerned. They are influenced by the purportedly pre-Christian mythological motifs which align wolves to Odin as beasts of battle in which wolf-like qualities are valued in order to be the best warrior. Though it may seem contradictory there is also a strong influence from the Christian equation of wolves with the darker sinful aspects and impulses of humanity that should be suppressed. From the medieval Christian perspective there are parallel struggles regarding nature fought by humans; one is physical struggle against nature in order to eke out a place of civilization in encroaching wilderness and a psychological struggle between humanity and the darker aspects of one's self. Bathory's Quorthon said that he was lead to use the Viking Age as a lyrical source because he wanted something in history that could be used to examine the "dark (not necessarily always the evil) side of life."¹³⁷ A figure frequently utilized in literature to represent and examine the darker side of human duality is that of the wolf or werewolf. Representative of the primal and more natural self, the wolf was often portrayed in medieval Christian literature as a metaphor for vice and sin. Desiring, as always, to distance themselves from Christian values metal bands often relate to and include wolves and other beasts of battle in their lyrics and iconography as representatives of human 'darkness', unbridled ferocity, warriors, and outlaws.

¹³⁵ Quorthon in an interview with Moynihan in *Lords of Chaos*. 2003. p. 93.

¹³⁶ Helheim. "Dualitel og Ulver". *Åsgårds Fall*. 2010.

¹³⁷ Quorthon. *Blood on Ice*, liner notes. 1996.

From Wilderness Came Death

Medieval literature reveals a deep unease felt by the writers and readers towards the wilderness. Stories frequently include a necessary departure from the centre of civilization into the wild to find and fulfill some sort of quest. There is a physical and symbolic demarcation of the boundaries of civilization. The wild is fraught with dangers as it is the realm of beasts- both real and imaginary that filled fantastical bestiaries, and outlaws. But Christian texts reveal not only a fear of the physical mortal dangers of the wild but the moral and psychological implications of being beyond the safe confines of Christian civilization. Satan is the wolf circling the sheepfold of Christendom awaiting his prey. Richard Bernheimer said that wildness “implied everything that eluded Christian norms and the established framework of Christian society, referring to what was uncanny, unruly, raw, unpredictable, foreign, uncultured, and uncultivated. It included the unfamiliar as well as unintelligible.”¹³⁸ The wild was considered dangerous because it is through culture that humans differentiate themselves from animals by taming or refining natural instincts and environment around them while those that are wild are swayed by instinct and unmitigated passion. Metal music embraces all that is wild and dark in the world and in human nature and through this affinity with the darkness and its harbingers such as wolves bands aim to transgress against the standard Christianized norms of modern society. The band Helheim warns to:

Verg deg for nord
Vokt deg for den urskog
Skapninger i ulvens ham
Fenris har blod på tann.¹³⁹

(Defend yourself against the north/ guard yourself from the primeval forest/ Creatures in the guise of the wolf/ Fenris has blood on (his) teeth) in the song “Jernskogen”. The song is warning Christians against the north and the dangers hidden in the primeval forest as retaliation is forthcoming for what Christians did to the pagans.

¹³⁸ Richard Bernheimer. *Wild men in the Middle Ages*. As quoted by Joep Leerssen in “Wildness, Wilderness, and Ireland: Medieval and Early-Modern Patterns in the Demarcations of Civility”. *Journal of the History of Ideas*. 56:1 (1995), 28.

¹³⁹ Helheim. “Jernskogen”. *Terrorveldet*. 1999.

In the song "From Wilderness Came Death" from Thryfing's 1999 album *Valdr Galga* a horde of wolves led by Fenrir attack a village first slaughtering the animals and then the thirty-three humans that feebly attempt to fight back.

Screams in the night woke the whole village up
Their cattle is getting attacked
The fences are broken and blood everywhere
Horses are lying there slack
Fenrir divided, a horde of grey wolves
His power inside of them all
Feasting on the guts of both stallions and goats
No animal in there stands tall

The people were struck by terror and fear
While beasts intruded their ground
Like the flow of a storm that none can control
Cascades of blood in the pound
Spears were thrown at the raging wolf horde
So hard to select them all out (in the night)
Running with bloodied fangs and fierce eyes
It sure doesn't help much to shout

In from wilderness came death
Wolves in the pound!

Setting some torches on fire might scare
but will those beasts disappear?
The scene turns real grim when the creatures change course
Grotesque, exploding fear
Thirty-three persons in spite with the wolves
So hungry and dangerous
Only much later when the sun rises
One can count the loss

The horrible fur-beasts defeated 'em all!
And the yard was a bloody mess
A village of death, Fenrir's cold work
Of entrails, bones and flesh
The people they fought in vain for their farm
Wolven hunger got fed
After this night of terror and pain
All the humans were dead

In from wilderness came death
Blood on the ground!¹⁴⁰

Described in this song is the reported insatiable gluttony of wolves as they slaughter and feast upon the entrails of all the animals and thirty-three people. “Wolven” hunger is particularly unslakable. The names of Odin’s wolves, Geri and Freki, both mean ‘the greedy one’ or ‘the ravenous one’, wolves chase and devour the sun and moon, and finally Fenrir consumes Odin during Ragnarok. Christian monks occasionally aligned the rapacity of wolves to that of the Vikings. Wolves could literally be seen as the devil or possessed by him but occasionally wolf attacks are seen as being sanctioned by God as punishment for sinful behaviour. The *Malleus Maleficarum* states that wolves that steal and eat men and children from their homes are caused by an illusion of devils when God wants to punish a nation for their sins.¹⁴¹ This is explained using *Leviticus* 26:22 which states that if God’s commandments are not obeyed he “will send wild animals against you, and they will rob you of your children, destroy your cattle and make you so few in number that your roads will be deserted.”¹⁴² The Vikings were described by different sources as being wolves and a punishment from God.

This depiction of an attack on a peaceful farmhouse bares many similarities to the account of the Viking attack on Lindisfarne in 793 as recounted by Simeon of Durham: “The same year the heathens arrived from the north to Brittany with a fleet of ships. They were like stinging wasps, and they spread in all directions like horrible wolves; wreaking, robbing, shattering and killing not only the animals but also priests, monks and nuns. They came to the church of Lindisfarne, slayed everything alive, dug up the altars and took all the treasures of the holy church.” The Vikings’ greed and disregard for the sanctity of church made Christians liken them to wolves and like wolves they were seen as a punishment from God. Wulfstan II¹⁴³ chastises the English for their sins in his *Sermo Lupi ad Anglos* and says that the Vikings defeat the English despite Æthelred’s attempts to pay them to go away through the consent of God. “We him gylðað singallice & hy us hynað dæghwamlice; hy hergað & hy bærnað, rypað & reafiað, & to scipe lædað. & la hwæt! Is ænig oðer on eallum þam gelimpum butan Godes yrrē

¹⁴⁰ Thyrfing. “From Wilderness Came Death”. *Valdr Galga*. 1999.

¹⁴¹ Heinrich Kramer and James Sprenger. *Malleus Maleficarum*. Trans. Montague Summers. New York: Cosimo. 2007. P 65.

¹⁴² *NIV* Leviticus 26:22.

¹⁴³ Archbishop of York who obviously did not equate wolves with evil.

ofer þas þeode swutol & gesæne?”¹⁴⁴ (“We pay them continually and they humiliate us daily; they ravage and they burn, plunder and rob and carry to the ship; and lo! what else is there in all these happenings except God’s anger clear and evident over this nation?”)¹⁴⁵ Metal bands perhaps unknowingly place themselves firmly within Christian symbolism as it cannot be imagined that they would relish the idea of being agents of God’s will. The similarities between the lyrics and Christian texts belies the inextricability of black metal from Christianity; the identity constructions found in metal, whether aligning oneself with Satan or the old Norse gods, are more about being contra-Christian than pro-Satanic or pro-pagan.

Becoming wolf and going berserk

Ideas of shape-shifting, werewolves, and the berserker frenzy are closely related in medieval Icelandic literature.¹⁴⁶ They all involve the human acquisition of animal characteristics. Berserkers psychologically transform and acquire the traits of wild animals- a wild animal in the shape of a man, and shape-shifting and lycanthropy are the physical transformation into an animal. Medieval literature and modern metal feature both kinds of transformation in similar ways.

According to Aspasia Stephanou, “Black metal *is* becoming wolf, embracing carnal desires, animal transformation and violent instincts.”¹⁴⁷ From its origin Black metal particularly second-wave Norwegian Black metal, strove to transgress against everything from the Death metal style that had been gaining in popularity to the societal expectation and norms. Black Metal welcomes that which is supposed to make us feel uncomfortable like the capacity for violence and the pursuit of carnal and uninhibited desires. This is done with the purpose of destroying civilized re: Christian society by accepting all the traits that Christianity has condemned. This makes one closer to an animal and is sometimes displayed through animal transformation. In Amon Amarth’s song “Live for the Kill” the line between human and wolf is unclear.

¹⁴⁴ Melissa Bernstein’s Wulfstan’s “Sermo Lupi ad Anglos”. An Electronic Hypertext Edition . line 95.

¹⁴⁵ Translation is Melissa Bernstein’s as well.

¹⁴⁶ For a detailed examination read Aðalheiður Guðmundsdóttir “The Werewolf in Medieval Icelandic Literature” *The Journal of English and Germanic Philology*. 106:3 (2007), 277-303.

¹⁴⁷ Aspasia Stephanou. “Playing Wolves and Red Riding Hoods in Black Metal”. *Hideous Gnosis: Black Metal Theory Symposium I*. Edited by Nicola Masciandaro, p159-160. Emphasis mine.

The pack of wolves
Are closing in
Now, hear the howling beasts
They move fast
Through winter woods
And soon it's time to feast

A vicious hunt
On through the night
The prey is short of breath
They feel the sting
Of burning eyes
That's fixed upon their necks

A predator's heart
Knows no remorse
It lives for the hunt
A predator's heart
Knows no remorse
It lives for the hunt
A natural force

They show their sharp
And grinning teeth
As howls are getting higher
Sending chills
Down fleeing spines
Their blood runs hot as fire

The vicious chase

Is soon at end
They're hunted until death
They feel the pain
Of sharpening steel
That's cutting through their flesh

Fearless warriors
Feed the wolves
Now hear the howling beasts
They move fast
Through winter woods
See the grey-backs feast

A natural force
It knows no remorse
And lives for the kill¹⁴⁸

It is as if the warriors and wolves are one group hunting their prey together or are the same beings. The hunt of the wolves is described and it is not revealed that there are warriors present until it is said that the prey is killed by sharpened steel. It seems like the two groups are one and the same: the wolf hunts, the human kills, and then the wolf feasts. The transition back and forth between the two implies a symbiosis and fluid connection linking characteristics of wolves to warriors and the human potential for violence.

In metal lyrics the closer one is to a primordial natural being the better. It is presented that only through rejecting the impositions of civilization and embracing the whole of human potential is one in their natural state. This entails a measure of primitivism, particularly 'hard primitivism' involving a violent life battling one's enemies and the harshness of Northern European nature. The preference for the brutal and violent lives of the imagined Viking warrior

¹⁴⁸ Amon Amarth. "Live for the Kill". *Twilight of the Thunder God*. 2008. What is slightly odd with this song is that it features the band Apocalyptica which is a Finnish metal band composed of three classically trained cellists and a drummer. A song glorifying the natural, primal, and animalistic state that features a very classical instrument such as the cello is a bizarre juxtaposition.

over that of the modern man is not dissimilar to Tacitus' praise of the Germanic barbarians which inferred a criticism of the decadent soft people the Romans had become. The idealization of the noble savage and the call to return to the natural state of being is rampant in metal lyrics.

Many songs recount the 'berserk frenzy', an altered mad state during an attack that makes one impervious to harm accompanied by animalistic utterances. It has been argued that the furious tempos and the rhythmic endurance required to make Black metal music, particularly the common 'blast beat' style of drumming, have a corollary to the ideal of superhuman strength and resistance to pain.¹⁴⁹ The rhythmic effects of blast beats and the tremolo picking guitar style may cause a similar experience to the drone-based religious chant traditions by creating a feeling of transcendence and ecstasy.¹⁵⁰ Some songs include the imbibition of mead or other substances before battle to instigate the berserker state while in others the berserk frenzy is an outlet of eternal rage and hatred.

One thousand years ago
In this land of ice and snow
Man lived with hatred just like me
The wrath lives on eternally
BERSERK
Feel no pain, there's only hate
No regret, it's all too late
I see your face, it's all I need
To grind you down and watch you bleed
BERSERK
My mind is blank, I am insane
You cry for mercy, cry in vain
I leave you trashed, for all to see

¹⁴⁹ Ross Hagen. "Musical Style, Ideology, and Mythology in Norwegian Black Metal." *Metal Rules the Globes: Heavy Metal around the World*. Eds. Jeremy Wallach, Harris M. Berger, Paul D. Greene. Duke University Press. Durham. 2011, 192.

¹⁵⁰ Ibid.

Berserk in me, eternally

BERSERK¹⁵¹

The protagonist of the song feels an eternal connection with his ancestors through hatred. The berserk rage is connected to that of madness and cruelty because of which he leaves someone 'trashed'- potentially dead and he feels neither pain nor remorse. Imke von Helden explains the berserker motif in metal music as "an escapist element and metaphor for finding a vent for disappointment and unjustness one has experienced."¹⁵² The imagined world the musicians have created provides a "flame of hope and a consoling remembrance of a reputedly glorious past, where loyalty and honesty were values that counted and where you could fight for something that was even worth dying for".¹⁵³ Metal music and characters in it such as berserkers are utilized as a means to express and release societal tensions and provide a safe milieu in which to imagine impossible but viscerally satisfying scenarios. They imagine that if they did not live in modern 'civilized' society it may be possible to avenge slights to their honour and pride. They claim to desire a society akin to that described in the saga where 'real' men could settle matters of honour with feuds. Their saga inspirations however may have been a similar fantasy. Jesse Byock suggests that "the sagas offered the audience the ability to explore the ramifications of an often outrageously individualistic and otherwise heroic but unsuccessful behaviour."¹⁵⁴ Metal lyrics focus on the violence; there are no songs enumerating and explaining Old Norse or Icelandic law codes. Thus Viking metal is one in a long line of artistic mediums through which people can express feelings and explore their (sometimes violent) fantasies.

Vargr: Outlaws and Lone Wolves

While the majority of the violence in metal lyrics is pure fantasy and has little impact in real life the early Norwegian Black metal scene was an exception that featured arson and murder. In 1993, the same year he was convicted of arson and murder, Kristian Vikernes legally changed

¹⁵¹ Unleashed. "Berserk". *Victory*. 1995.

¹⁵² Imke von Helden. "'A Furore Normannorum, Libere nos Domine!' A Short History of Going Berserk in Scandinavian Literature and Heavy Metal." *Interdisciplinary.net's Heavy Fundametalisms: Metal, Power, and Politics Conference*. Ed. Niall Scott. 2010, 190.

¹⁵³ Ibid.

¹⁵⁴ Jesse Byock. "Feuding in Viking Age Iceland's Great Village". In *Conflict in Medieval Europe: Changing Perspectives on Society and Culture*. Eds. Warren C. Brown and Piotr Górecki. Aldershot: Ashgate, (2003), p 16.

his first name to Varg. In Old Norse the word *vargr* meant wolf but it was used also for outlaws. Varg Vikernes was both a *morðvargr* (murderer) and *brennuvargur* (arsonist- modern Icelandic?).¹⁵⁵ Outlaws were outside the bounds of civilization and law and could be killed without penalty akin to wolves. While Vikernes' criminal activities are far from the norm there are connections to outlaws in metal culture. Cornelius Jakhell of the Norwegian band Solefald made a two album concept piece containing his "Icelandic Odysey" that tells the tale of a king's skald who was seduced by his queen and then outlawed when she claimed he raped her. The song "Survival of the Outlaw" draws heavily upon the wolf/outlaw connection.

As a hungry wolf with an old man's teeth I run
Freezing cold in caves, forever crushing the sun
The daylight and all time when the weather is clear
I live in night and darkness, that's why I'm still here
Iceland was my home with seals in the fjords
My winter's only thought is fleeing from the hordes
They may come any time to kill me like a dog
Always on guard I pray for another day of fog
As the outlaw I am I shout at the mighty Thor
Greatest god of thunder I can't take it anymore
Take me home where smoke rises from the halls
Make me welcome again within the Chieftain's walls
Drown his treacherous wife the adulterous Queen
Who told the King what a rapist I had been
She lied she was wrong she asked me to seduce her
In her games of sex I was bound to be the loser
She harmed her husband's skald, caused the poet's disgrace
Outlawed at Althingi, I can never show my face
At Reykjanes again, lest I want to endure
All the evils she accused me of doing to her
More bone than man, I hail the gods of the North
Avenge my injustices, I beg you to come forth
Misfortune loves both fool and wise
For seven winters I have strayed the land of ice
A master of the word and a man of the sword
Of tongue and steel many times I proved to be lord
Gods of the North, I beg you come forth
More bone than man Odin I hail you
As a slave on the run I must stay out of sight
Allfather make my destiny right
That in none of the worlds whose number is nine
Another innocent must suffer a fate like mine

¹⁵⁵ Guðmundsdóttir, p283.

As the outlaw I am I shout at night Thor
Great god of thunder I can't take it anymore
Take me to Reykjavik where smoke rises from the halls
Make me welcome again within my Chieftain's walls¹⁵⁶

The outlaw has only survived by living as a wolf on the boundaries of civilization in the realms of darkness and night and shunning the light. He is forced to constantly hide and run as he knows that people may hunt him down and kill him 'like a dog' at any time without repercussion. He calls upon the gods to help him as he wants to return the safety and warmth of his chieftain's hall and if not help him then to prevent another innocent man from facing his fate.

Whether voluntarily or not metalheads are often perceived as being outside society. This can be a voluntary exclusion because of elitist attitudes where they feel they are outside and better than society and the majority of population and so they create their own elite group within society's 'other'. This is tied to the strong themes of individualism present in metal. In Black metal this is typically expressed by once again co-opting Christian symbolism and calling the populace sheep which would then infer that they are the superior wolf who is able to stand alone. There is also connection to word heathen in that it not only means one that worships the old gods but comes 'from the heath' outside civilization.¹⁵⁷ In Ensiferum's song "Treacherous Gods" the lyricist anthropomorphises a wolf by giving it the emotions of pain and loneliness:

I have seen through the eyes of a wolf
And felt all its pain and loneliness
The beautiful land opened before my eyes
Wild as a beast I ran into the night.¹⁵⁸

The pain ascribed to the wolf is in reaction to the dominion of the 'treacherous gods' of the song's title who brought the land misfortune, leaving it a "dead and hollow land of ice", and whose "honour is about to be crushed". This is another example of human/animal connection where there may not be a physical transformation but the soul of a person enters that of an animal such as Úlfir Bjálfason ('Kveld-Úlfir') in *Egils saga* or Boðvar Bjarki as a bear in *Hrólfr*

¹⁵⁶ Solefald. "Survival of the Outlaw". *Red for Fire: An Icelandic Odyssey Part I*. 2005.

¹⁵⁷ Olson, 62.

¹⁵⁸ Ensiferum "Treacherous Gods". *Ensiferum*. 2000.

saga kraka. The songwriter parallels the wolf's loss of habitat to the loss of old traditions and the loneliness of one who chooses to maintain them.

The idea of a lone wolf in metal is an odd one because there would not be metal without the larger scene in general. While there are many one-man bands, music is generally impossible without some sort of wider scene if bands ever desire to play live or sell albums. Olson argues that by appealing to the animalistic "black metalers attempt to simultaneously resolve the problems of herd mentality and constrictive notions of singular, isolated selfhood", thus developing a more nuanced idea of the self than what is associated with binary oppositions of "self/other and "individual/group". ¹⁵⁹

Conclusion

While many wolf and werewolf texts are written as foils for the darker aspects and horrible potential of humanity in fear that these negative characteristics are inherent within humanity and are capable of taking control metal's wolf-texts glorify and celebrate these hideous potentials.

¹⁵⁹ Olson, 79.

Case Study

Turisas: *The Varangian Way*

The Finnish band Turisas far exceeds the majority of bands discussed in the rest of this thesis in terms of historical accuracy¹⁶⁰ and as such a unique case is deserving of separate attention. The lyrics for this album take inspiration from the sagas and comparisons can be made to travel þættir.

Their second album *The Varangian Way* is a concept album that follows the personal journey of a bastard named Haakon as well as the physical journey of he and 500 men as they traverse the Russian river routes from the Baltic coast, through Kiev, and finally to Miklagard- the Viking name for Constantinople. In terms of content the songs are similar to the medieval Icelandic travel þættir. Songwriter and lyricist Mathias Nygård re-imagines the voyages of the Varangians drawing on medieval source material; he makes comments on history and development of historiography while demonstrating history's relevancy to a modern audience.

Each song on the album corresponds to a geographical location on the austrvegr or the Way to the East. The album commences with 'To Holmgard and Beyond' at the Baltic coast where the listener is introduced to Haakon and a couple of the crew and their motivation for travelling.

Holmgard and beyond

That's where the winds will us guide

For fame and for gold

Set sails for those lands unknown

The song 'A Portage to the Unknown' tells of the necessary portage at the end of the river Lovat in which their longships had to be dragged ashore and gradually pulled over land on a rolling bed of tree trunks. The fact that they are heading into the unknown is stressed in these first two songs, despite having vague goals in mind they have no definite purpose in their journey. The songs 'Cursed Be Iron' and 'Fields of Gold' somewhat depart from the direct concept of the album of the journey- one is a story from the Finnish Kalevala and the other about modern day

¹⁶⁰ In lyrics NOT costume.

Ukraine. ‘In the Court of Jarisleif’ is a typical fun drinking song that takes place in Kiev where the voyagers are being feasted in the home of Yaroslav the Wise who was ruler of the Rus from 1015-1054. The next song is ‘Five Hundred and One’ in which they have to deal with the aftermath of the previous nights’ partying while seriously contemplating the offers made during the night. It is a time of decision of if they want to turn back, continue with their quest, or depart in a different direction. It is at this time they develop a real sense of a purpose and destination. ‘The Dnieper Rapids’ is located on the seven locks in a short stretch of the Dnieper River. This particular stretch of the route is described in *De Administrando Imperio* which was a foreign and domestic policy manual written by the Byzantine emperor Constantine VII Porphyrogenitus. Both the medieval document and song detail how to traverse the locks, the particular difficulty of the fourth rapid given the name Insatiable One by the Vikings, and the attacks of the nomadic Pechenegs. The album comes to a conclusion with the song ‘Miklagard Overture’ where Haakon reaches his goal and experiences the same awe that is described in medieval documents of visitors of the overwhelming majesty of the city and its crowning glory- Hagia Sophia. Embodied within this conclusion is the possibility of continuation; that the completion of one accomplishment can lead to another.

This sort of journey is similar to the ones described in travel Þættir. Þættir are independent short stories interspersed within the Icelandic sagas. A type of þættir, the *útfararsaga* are “accounts of a journey abroad” in which Icelanders travel for fame, wealth, and social position before returning home. *The Varangian Way* fits the typical travel pattern as described by Lönnroth as it follows the adventures of a single hero and a unified group of heroes as opposed to the grander scope of the sagas that can follow an entire lineage of a family or history of a district.¹⁶¹ Þættir and a modern song structure both “must be content merely to suggest complexity of motive with a subtle outline,” but this does not preclude the ability to achieve the same profundity and insight into the character that can be achieved on the larger scale.¹⁶² Modern songs are limited to a basic song structure of chorus and verse and lyrics may take secondary importance to rhythm.

¹⁶¹ Byock, Jesse. “Saga Form, Oral Prehistory, and the Icelandic Social Context”.

¹⁶² Anthony Faulkes *Two Icelandic Sagas*, 3.

Þættir are most concerned with the portrayal and development of character and the album *The Varangian Way* delves deeply into the protagonist's journey of self-discovery.¹⁶³ Haakon is a bastard in a society that, while accepting of bastards, also places high importance on kinship and patrilineal relations. It is recorded in the Norwegian Frostathing law that every child must have a father and that if the mother is unwilling or unable to reveal the child's father then the decision of infanticide rests with her male relatives.¹⁶⁴ While bastards are regularly named in saga material, the fathers are known and acknowledged. Haakon's fatherlessness is a source of insecurity and self-doubt. A number of lyrics focus on origins of self:

Who is 'I' without a past?

A river without a source?

An event without a cause?

And later:

The rug has been pulled from under my feet

All my life made of lies and deceit

All I have left is a symbol on my chest

My only lead on my desperate quest.

Haakon was branded at birth with the sign of Perun who is a thunder god similar to Thor but is the highest god in Slavonic mythology. The brand is described in *The Portage to the Unknown*:

Six regular edges and six vertices

Six equilateral triangles

Six square faces in another dimension

Plato's earth transparent

This description matches with the *Gromoviti znaci* or thunder marks that are ancient symbols of Perun and are regularly found engraved in roof beams of rural houses and believed to protect them from lightning. This brand is his one source of connection to his lost father and so is part

¹⁶³ Faulkes, 4

¹⁶⁴ Jochens, Jenny, *Women in Old Norse Society*, 81-93

of his motivation to explore Eastern Europe. The choice of using a Slavic god instead of Thor, another of the Norse pantheon, or even the Finnish god Ukko is an interesting one that removes much of the Scandinavian or personal claim to the character. It is also interesting because it is generally said that only Swedish Vikings went east but Sweden at the time could be said to include Finland and numerous Baltic states. The term Varangian is a difficult one as it was a name given to any foreigner as the southern Rus would not differentiate between men from Sweden, Finland, north Russia, or the Baltic. It is apparent that Nygård is aware of the troublesome debate between Scandinavian and Russian historians involving the level of Scandinavian involvement in the origins of the Russian state and he (perhaps wisely) chooses to bypass the controversy.

The term *þættir* originally meant “a strand of rope” as in a single strand that made up a part of a larger rope as a *þættir* does in a larger narrative. Nygård draws upon this rope imagery when describing fate:

Threads of different lengths

Some longer, some shorter

So many of them spun together

The crones keep on weaving

The algorithm of our lives

Cause and effect, the fates of men.

Fate plays a large role in all Old Norse, Old Icelandic, and Old English texts as can be revealed in the gravity of prophecy and it was paramount in the lives and faiths of the medieval people. According to the Old Norse sources, people in pre-Christian Scandinavian believed that they would join Odin in Valhalla if they achieved an honourable death in battle and that the gods and the Norns had control over whether they achieved this fate. This predetermination allows for recklessness of behaviour that could be described as the “Varangian Way” of life.

Many dangers lie ahead

Some of us may never return

Rather sold as a slave to the Saracens

Than chained to your bed, chained by your life!

These lyrics acknowledge that they have chosen a difficult and dangerous path that may cost their lives but the risk is worth it because the thrill and outcome of adventure is better than a sedate and calm existence. Those that risk nothing have nothing to gain.

Despite the acknowledgement of risk, one thing that is conspicuously absent from the album are battles. Unlike their first album entitled *Battle Metal* and their follow up *Stand Up and Fight*, *The Varangian Way* is completely devoid of war-songs which is ironic because it is their album most faithful to Viking history. I can only hypothesize that this is in order to distance themselves from the typical portrayal of Vikings as bloodthirsty warriors and to stress the personal and emotional journeys of the characters rather than their martial accomplishments. This complies with the evolution of Viking historiography, particularly when it faced a romanticization in the Victorian Era. Influential in this romanticization was the Swede Erik Gustaf Geijer who in his poem “The Viking” describes an ideal heroic seafarer as opposed to the previously popular image of the pillaging barbarian. That story is also about a young man (and likely bastard) who leaves his mother’s home to find adventure and fame.

Just as Geijer’s poem departed from the popular usage and portrayal of Vikings so does Turisas’. Most other Viking metal bands thrive on the outdated scholarship of the barbarian Viking horde and use them as representations of unbridled masculinity and many use them for nationalistic, anti-religious, and racial purposes. Turisas separates themselves from this tradition by aligning more closely with the updated historiography that focuses on the vibrant cultural practices and lifestyles of the medieval Scandinavians.

The lyrics “Breathing history, veiled in mystery” from the song “Miklagard Overture” acknowledge the key difficulty in working with medieval source material. Nygård obviously conducted extensive research in order to write this album and so it is apparent he knows the debates and issues surrounding the notoriously difficult usage of certain materials. He delves into actual history while numerous other bands partake in pseudohistorical exploits. The Icelandic and Norse sagas are our main sources of information about northern European society in the Viking age. Their use as historical sources is difficult because history is veiled in layers of personal stories and bias, mythology, legend, and exaggeration. He displays familiarity with the

fact that the study of history can be obscured by various nationalistic purposes and that the study of non-literate cultures must be undertaken carefully and interdisciplinarily.

The events described in the songs take place in the 11th century, yet despite the enormous gap in time the band focuses on issues and problems that are still highly relevant in today's society and this can explain much of their appeal beyond their musicianship. While a fan may not be able to relate to a Viking risking life and limb for adventure they do relate to the feeling that risk is worth the reward and that it is better to push oneself out of one's comfort zone to avoid being trapped in a mediocre life. While they would never make the physical journey, young fans find it easy to relate to the journey of self-discovery and constructions of selfhood while facing alienation. Lyrics such as:

Out in the open sea I've swum without a sight
A sight of an opposite shore, a sight of some light
Turning back, staying here, my strength is running out
Forward or I drown.

In which an individual must make the difficult choice of moving forward despite not knowing what the outcome will be. This sort of material in which one must continue even without hope or drown without trying has, according to fans on message boards, helped them through bouts of depression and has been an encouragement in difficult times. The popular imagery of the Vikings is imbued with a sort of indomitable spirit that some people can draw a great deal of strength from.

This type of medievalism reaches fans on numerous levels. On the most basic level is the simple entertainment value of fantastically written and entertainingly bombastic music, and there is enjoyment on further levels for those willing to delve into the history behind the songs. Music like this has an educational value because listeners who do not know much about history seek out the answers and communicate with other fans regarding interpretation and meaning of lyrics. Studying Viking metal can reveal issues about how modern day Scandinavians reinterpret their cultural past. The loyal and growing fan base for Viking metal shows that interest in medieval Scandinavian history is alive and well.

Conclusion

Viking metal bands use the Middle Ages and the Viking Age as a screen upon which to play with nostalgic imaginings of what life was like then or at least how it should have been based upon aspects of the collective memory of their communities which can include the works of historians and that of artists and political figures. They use this as a means of criticizing the modern Christian world they perceive as being weaker than the ancient one. The three main components of Viking metal are:

- The idealization of a national past from which an ethnic identity can be constructed on a national, Scandinavian, or pan-Nordic level.
- A staunch opposition to Christianity that is based on the perceived oppression of their ancestors in the Viking Age for which they lust for vengeance. This vengeance is described as taking place in a grand Ragnarok-inspired battle between the pagan forces and the Christian.
- The romanticization of the natural primordial world and its 'dark forces'. The legacy with is contained within the ethnic blood of the people and tied to the land.

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